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“PEEL BACK THE LAYERS OF ITS STORIES AND IDEAS AS YOU PLAY”



I love world building in games. There's something magical about the way writers, artists, and designers come together to create their own new reality – a place you can step into and peel back the layers of its stories and ideas as you play.

So naturally the idea of a survival game that crafts a BioWare-like fantasy world

while you're crafting your stone axes appeals to me. *Nightingale* has the potential to offer proper fantastical escapism with friends – *Valheim*, but stuffed with lore. Find out more by travelling to the mystical realm of PC Gamer issue 370...

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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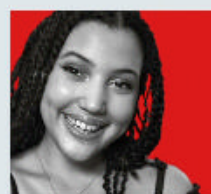
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The PC Gamer team



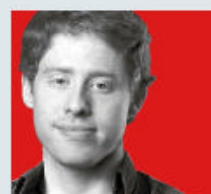
CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
[@screencuisine](https://twitter.com/screencuisine)

This month
Spent a day with the creators of *Nightingale*, and just came back with loads of stuff about hats.



IMOGEN MELLOR
Twitter
[@ImoMellor](https://twitter.com/ImoMellor)

This month
Discovered the pure and innocent joy of shooting Nazis in the testicles from 600 metres away.



WES FENLON
Twitter
[@wesleyfenlon](https://twitter.com/wesleyfenlon)

This month
Claimed Star Trek was better when it was about diplomacy rather than explosions. Nerd.



RICH STANTON
Twitter
[@RichJStanton](https://twitter.com/RichJStanton)

This month
Had to email CD Projekt RED to ask them the difference between a cat and a lynx.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Due to the new partnership with Epic, the question of the Epic Games Store was raised: CDPR has said the game will not be an Epic Store exclusive.

CODE WITCHER

THE WITCHER 4 has been announced – is a post-*Cyberpunk 2077* comeback on the cards?

CD Projekt has announced that a new *Witcher* game is in development “kicking off a new saga for the franchise”. While the details are scarce at this stage, the most immediately noticeable part of the announcement is that – after basically building the studio on it – CD Projekt is leaving behind its latest iteration of REDengine, the tech behind *Cyberpunk 2077*, and moving to Unreal Engine 5.

Ever since the *Witcher 3*’s final DLC, players have been ravenous to find out what’s next: but *Cyberpunk 2077*

put that on the back-burner for many years, and that game’s story looms large here. The simple version is that, while this was always coming at some point, CDPR’s reputation took a battering over *Cyberpunk*’s release while the *Witcher* TV series brought the series to new heights of popularity. CDPR has a golden goose.

**CDPR MAY
INSTEAD PURSUE
ORIGINAL
CHARACTERS**

CIRI-OUS BUSINESS

The announcement came with a teaser image, a snow-covered *Witcher* medallion that is definitely not from the School of the Wolf. Initially people thought it was a re-designed logo for the School of the Cat, but CDPR’s global community director Marcin Momot subsequently said on social media it was a Lynx. In an email to PCG he writes, “I can confirm that the medallion is, in fact, shaped after a lynx.”

This is where things get slightly muddled. The Lynx School is a new school established after the events of *The Witcher 3* by members of the School of the Cat and Geralt’s pal

EASTER EGG EGG

NEW WITCHER 3 SECRET



As if there wasn't enough *Witcher* news! CDPR quest designer Philipp Weber dropped a hint about a character from the *Blood and Wine* DLC. Just complete Vivienne's quest in a way that lifts her curse but promises death in seven years, find her and wait seven in-game years, and she dies. ■ **JM**

THE MOTHERLODE

CUSTOMS CRYSIS



Customs authorities in China are now able to play *Crysis* on max settings after discovering \$3 million worth of graphics cards incorrectly labelled at their border. Some 5,840 XFX RX 6700 XT graphics cards were seized, making Chinese customs a PC gaming superpower in its own right. ■ **JR**

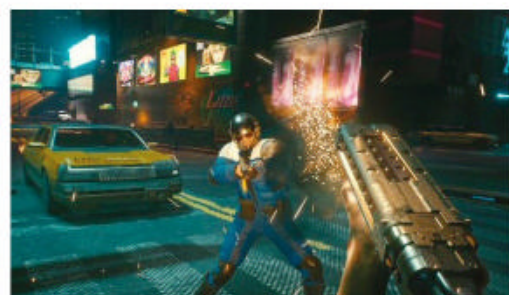


STAGE FRIGHT

E3 CANCELLED AGAIN



E3 has been cancelled for 2022. This marks the second cancellation in the show's 27-year history, with the first occurring in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Entertainment Software Association, which organises the event, has stated the show will return in 2023 with a "reinvigorated showcase". ■ **RL**



TOP: Don't give up on a Ciri game yet: in what many consider to be the 'best' ending, Ciri becomes a witcher and sets off on her own.

ABOVE: The move away from REDengine is a genuine surprise: CD Projekt has always advocated for and invested heavily in it. Clearly *Cyberpunk 2077*'s troubled development left some scars.

Lambert. The only issue: the Lynx School is fanfic, and has no basis in either the *Witcher* novels or videogames.

Well, until now! The important point about the School of the Lynx, if indeed CDPR is roughly hewing towards this unofficial history, is that it is explicitly post-Geralt in setting: but would still leave the door open to appearances by him and others from the original *Witcher* trilogy. CDPR has previously been clear that the next *Witcher* wouldn't feature Geralt as lead, nor be called *Witcher 4*. Despite speculation inevitably focussing around existing characters, mainly Ciri, there's a strong chance CDPR may instead pursue original characters that it will own the rights to: it renewed its rights agreement with *Witcher* creator Andrzej Sapkowski in 2019, and the deal most notably says, "The agreement confers new rights upon [CDPR] and reaffirms its existing title to 'The Witcher' intellectual property in developing videogames, graphic novels, board games, and merchandise."

What we do know is that, following the *Cyberpunk 2077* launch after over two years of hype, CDPR has said it won't be showing trailers and demos for future games until much closer to launch. So don't expect to see the next *Witcher* this year but, once the game itself is shown, the monster-slaying will be imminent.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Epic gesture

Epic donated two weeks of *Fortnite* profits to help Ukraine.

Elden running

Speedrunners have well and truly hit the Lands Between and the record is now 18 minutes to complete it.

Colossal comeback

Ken and Roberta Williams, Sierra Online founders, are working together again after 20 years on a remake of *Colossal Cave Adventure*.

Twitch Pro-no!

Twitch trialed a feature called Boost Train except it got hijacked, became the Porn Train, and is on hiatus.

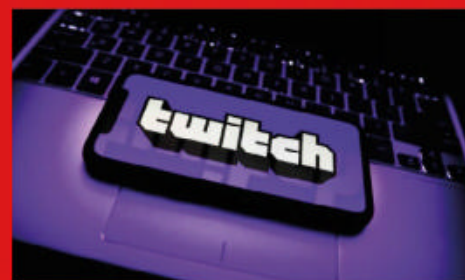
COD fish

COD streamer Kenji was accused of cheating: he disputed it by sharing clips that... showed wallhacks.

PS wow!

Sony is re-jigging its PlayStation Plus service tiers, which matters to PC gamers because accessing PS Now is going to double in price.

LOWS

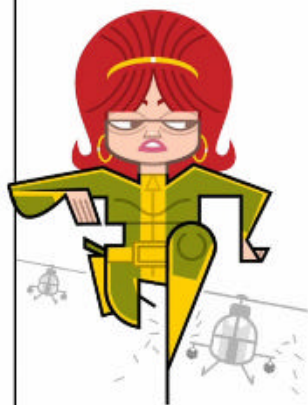


The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has spent decades watching the industry – observing the full domain of videogames and the people who make them. At times, The Spy has been tempted to step in; to lead confused and frightened executives away from their undoing and towards their salvation. *Duke Nukem Forever*? *Aliens: Colonial Marines*? *Anthem*? The Spy could have helped, could have prevented disaster. But doing so would break the covenant of The Spy – the very thing that gives The Spy purpose, maybe even power. The Spy can only watch, never touch. The vigil must continue.

The Spy would like you to know that this is very frustrating. “You fools,” The Spy will shout, unheard, “You can’t just throw every shooter trope into a game like an algorithm spitting out keywords. Either be a MOBA or be a battle royale. Don’t try to be both and a dozen other things besides.” And yet despite The Spy’s protests, Amazon still released *Crucible*, and it tanked so hard that you had forgotten it existed. The Spy remembers. The Spy is similarly concerned about Ubisoft. This is the studio that – with *Far Cry 3* – turned “the definition of insanity” into a meme. And yet it’s also a studio that seems content with doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different result.



THE SPY
The Spy knew this would happen.

HYPER ACTIVE?

So then: in the same month that Ubisoft’s battle royale *Hyper Scape* is closing, rumours surfaced about a new battle royale in development. According to Exputer’s Tom Henderson – whose multiple anonymous sources were verified by Kotaku’s anonymous source – this new game is codenamed *Pathfinder*. In it, teams of four players drop onto the map and must find their way to the centre to fight an AI boss. Based on the description, the map contains two large walls, each with a series of gates. Each game, you’ll need to find which of the gates can be breached to make your way forward. Essentially, then, the game is to *find a path*. The Spy gets it now.

Here is the crucial question, though: do players even want a new battle royale, even one that is mixing things up? As Ubisoft has already learned, it’s incredibly tough to break the stranglehold of the few big names in the genre – your *Apexes* and *Fornites* and *Warzones*. There are only so many human beings, and even the ones that really love having a big fight on an island only have a finite amount of time on this Earth. Some could say it’s admirable that Ubisoft is taking another swing at the genre, but there are other words for it too.

Another example of Ubisoft’s persistence came just a day after it announced that *Ghost Recon Breakpoint* would not be getting any future updates, when Kotaku reported that a new game in the series was in development. Codenamed *OVER*, this is said to be a different game to *Ghost Recon Frontline*, which is undergoing a development “reset” following negative feedback during playtests.

There are no details about *OVER* yet, nor is there any word about whether it will carry forward *Breakpoint*’s controversial NFTs. One of the selling points NFT advocates like to tout is ‘interoperability’, and how items could theoretically be transferred from one game to

another. As yet, this has not worked out in the real world where game development actually happens, but Ubisoft seems invested in pursuing this tech whether anyone wants it or not. Alas, The Spy is powerless to intervene. We can but watch the disaster play out. ■

The Spy

CRUCIBLE TANKED SO HARD THAT YOU HAD FORGOTTEN IT EXISTED

This month in... 2012



1 At 94%, *Company of Heroes* is still the highest score PC Gamer has awarded an RTS. The sequel, alas, couldn’t quite match up. “Huge, powerful, and just a little bit broken,” our review would say. More interesting was what happened after, as Russian users flocked to Metacritic to condemn the game’s depiction of the USSR’s troops. An early review bomb in action.

ISSUE
240, June 2012
ON THE COVER
Company of Heroes 2
IN THE CINEMAS
Marvel Avengers Assemble



2 In a review section filled with niche RPGs and strategy games, Paradox stands out with the truly awful *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*. Score: 19%.

3 Developer Robert Yang takes us on a tour of the weird, experimental world of indie FPSes. From ambient sound machines like *Proteus* and *Fract OSC*, to reality-twisting puzzlers like *Cities of Day and Night* and *Trauma*, this is a compelling snapshot of the breadth of the genre. Last year’s *Cruelty Squad* proves this experimental streak lives on.

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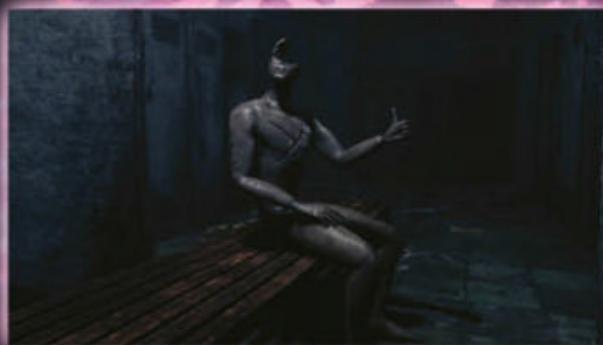
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Something even bigger could be on the horizon – but what?

GOING BIG

How **LARIAN STUDIOS** tripled in size to make *Baldur's Gate III*

Larian Studios always goes all-in. After nearly bankrupting itself to make *Divinity: Original Sin* in 2015, Larian tripled in size to pull off an ambitious sequel, growing to 150 developers. With one of the best RPGs of the decade under its belt, Larian then set out to make *Baldur's Gate III*. A year in pre-production let them make a call on how much work this even more ambitious game would take. “We thought we had it all figured out. We even estimated how big we’d have to become,” said Larian founder Swen Vincke.

They were wrong. “I never expected us to be 400 people to make *Baldur's Gate III*,” Vincke told me. “Nobody expected it. But it’s literally what we needed to do it.”

Appropriately for an RPG studio that was deeply committed to player choices leading down dramatically diverging paths, Larian found itself at a crossroads after launching *Baldur's Gate III* into Early Access in 2020. “We thought we understood what we needed to do to make this game,” Vincke said. “Then we actually *really* understood. And so we had two choices: we could scale it down, or we could scale ourselves up. And so we chose to scale ourselves up.”

It was the only real option to make *Baldur's Gate III* what Vincke wants it to be, “The benchmark incarnation

of D&D 5th Edition in a videogame.” With 400 developers now spread across seven studios, located in Belgium, Ireland, England, Spain, Canada and Malaysia, Larian is nearly ten times the size it was in 2014 making *Original Sin*. Cinematics were a huge complicating factor that affected everything in the game, even dramatically impacting the writing process. On *Original Sin II*, the writers could tinker with text until essentially the last minute, thanks to an automated pipeline they built that would send new text straight to the recording studios for actors to record the next day. But that doesn’t work when every dialogue scene is meticulously animated – writing has gone from one of the final steps in the process to one of the first.

“There are so many steps in-between now, so many people that need to look at it,” Vincke explained. “Cinematic designers, cinematic animators, the casting director, lighting, VFX, SFX. So you don’t just add a line like that anymore. You’re very aware of your cinematic budget, the cost, and the waterfall that follows from it. We’ve had to reinvent ourselves, how we work... so that we can still iterate.”

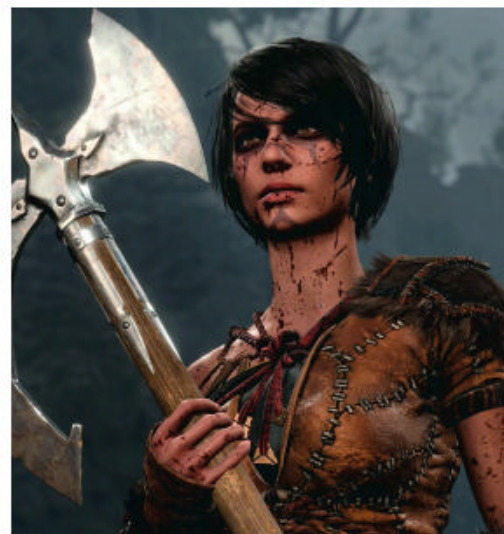
SIN CITY

This kind of growth is risky, even with a licence as big as D&D. Larian spent years as a tiny RPG studio just barely



Loaded dice

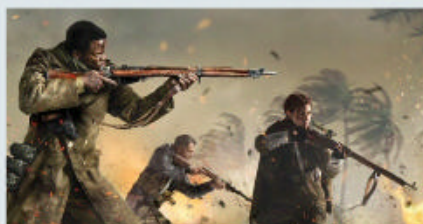
“We wanted failure to be its own reward, so that if you failed you should continue like you do with a good DM,” Vincke said. “We built all these cinematic moments to react if you fail, but the majority just want to succeed on their die roll and are just going to save scum.” After some intense feedback, Larian tweaked the RNG to favour players.



FAR LEFT: To describe the studio as 'passionate' would be an understatement.

LEFT: Larian has grand ambitions for *Baldur's Gate III*'s 1.0 launch, coming... when it's ready.

BIG BUSINESS *Four studios that started small before scaling up to make a major franchise*



TREYARCH

Treyarch's 1998 debut, *Die by the Sword*, has about 14 devs credited. The COD studio now has 550+ employees.



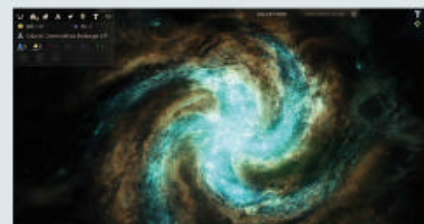
TRAVELLER'S TALES

Thirteen credited developers worked on 1989's *Leander*. Today the Lego studio has around 300 employees.



ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

About 30 devs worked on *Urban Chaos*. 250+ are at the studio now, as it makes *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*.



AMPLITUDE STUDIOS

Amplitude made its first 4X, *Endless Space*, with about 20 devs. Now owned by Sega, the studio has 150+ employees.

scraping by. But based on Larian's track record with the *Original Sin* games, Vincke is maybe the only founder of a 400-person studio who can get away with saying: "We've never been about the money."

"I guess a lot of people say that, but it's really about what we need to make this game," he said. "I would literally have a revolution inside of my company if I forced them to lower their aspirations, the things they want to do. They're really proud of *Baldur's Gate III*. They really want to reach the ambition that they have, because they all played *Baldur's Gate I* and *II* in their youth. This is a very important project for them. I'm happy we're doing it this way, because I think it deserves it, and we have the means of doing it because of the success of the previous games. I would not have wanted it to be a game that had to be scaled down."

Larian's stratospheric growth required restructuring, putting more control and responsibility into smaller teams dedicated to different game systems and features. "I play a lot, and I say what I think but they don't necessarily listen to me anymore," he laughed. "Which is a good thing, right? That's where ownership comes in. I still guide them together, but the team has evolved a lot, matured a lot, as we had to. Otherwise the scale would've strangled us."

Vincke wouldn't spill any dirt on what Larian will do after *Baldur's Gate III*, but it's clear he has big plans. He said this studio expansion came "maybe one game sooner than we wanted," and barely seemed able to resist talking about that next project. Vincke founded

Larian in 1996 to make RPGs because of how much he loved *Ultima*. Perhaps EA's finally ready to do something with that licence?

GATE KEEPERS

In the here and now, though, Larian's currently working on *Baldur's Gate* itself, building out the city, and filling out D&D's spell library and implementing its remaining classes. Playable gnomes are coming at some point, too, which Vincke accidentally let slip during a 2022 Game Developers Conference panel. Then there's time-consuming polish, which is why he announced that *Baldur's Gate III* won't be fully finished until 2023.

"This is a very specific niche of game where you have a lot of narrative with a lot of systems coming together," he said. "If your agency is [limited] you're not gonna

be happy when you're playing it. It breaks the entire thing. The problem is the only alternative is just, *fuuuuck*, you need to cover it all. But we figured it out, and we're doing it.

"There were really lots of easy cuts that we could've done. But then it wouldn't have been the game that it needs to be. We're not going to release it if it's not ready. It's going to be quite the thing, you know. When you go to the character creation and you can select all those classes, all those sub classes, and then you start that journey – knowing everything you can do on that journey, it's going to be quite the thing." ■

Wes Fenlon

"IT'S REALLY ABOUT WHAT WE NEED TO MAKE THIS GAME"

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

ROUGH SKETCH

How Adult Swim and hip hop inform **BALDUR'S GATE III'S** Panels from Hell

Since *Baldur's Gate III's* announcement in 2019, Larian has made an art of the disaster demo. It usually happens like this: during an onstage presentation, creative director Swen Vincke deviates from the 'golden path' – a pre-approved route through the game, tested and made bug-free for demonstration purposes. He clicks on something he shouldn't, and that thing breaks, in front of a large crowd.

"If our developers are in the audience, they're losing their minds," says Larian's director of publishing, Michael Douse. "But everyone on my team and the audience are laughing their asses off. Even our first showing of the game at PAX was an absolute shitshow. It's so antithetical to what a presentation should be, but it is funny. Funny is such an important word."

Comedy is Larian's secret weapon in holding audience attention for what Douse describes as a five year marketing campaign for *BGIII*. "Publishing for me is basically run like a comedy writers' room," he says. "We have a lot of discussions, and we try and find the funniest ideas."

It's a process inspired by Douse's admiration for Adult Swim comedians like Tim & Eric, as well as the surreal, shambolic *Eric Andre Show*. The results are best appreciated in Larian's Panels from Hell, high concept streams timed to show off important updates to *Baldur's Gate III*. February's live playthrough opened on a lavish feast scene, in which Vincke, wearing a full suit of armour, casually mucked about in *Divinity: Original Sin II* on the Steam Deck.

"We have a special guest!" babbled Vincke. "Unfortunately he had to go for a second, he's in traffic right now, he's gonna come back. He had to talk to the person that leaked our trailer earlier today. I hope none of you saw it, if you've seen it, forget about it." The CEO gestured to a nearby ice sculpture of a D&D mind flayer. "Otherwise this guy's gonna help you forget about it."

In a typical Panel from Hell, clumsy camerawork and unplanned departures from the script are par for the course, and part of the appeal. "When you look at the comedy scene and how people are starting to go direct, if you have the right crew, you can basically make an ad lib, ad hoc TV show," Douse says. "We just allow that messiness and loosely structured team dynamic to flow, and sprinkle news on top of that."

PUB CHAT

Larian's publishing team coalesced after the success of the *Divinity: Original Sin* games – with the intention of reducing outside influences. "Self-publishing was really the logical step," Douse says. "Because that way we control the distribution, timelines, release dates. Nobody can tell us what our messaging should be. There is one outside influence that we do not cut off, which is the audience. What we want to do is be as close to the audience as possible, with as little as possible in between."

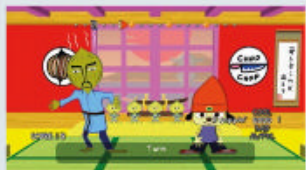
For this part of his job, Douse takes inspiration from music, and lots of it – on a slow morning, he'll have listened to three hours of conscious hip hop and Ethiopian jazz before his international team clocks in. "On an ideal day, I can listen to some RAP Ferreira and then go to a meeting, and I can talk to that person in a way that is as authentic as the music I've just been listening to," he says. "Publishing is really just communication – a finely crafted, deliberate message for a very engaged and specific audience. And that's really what hip hop is now, and that's why I'm so connected to it."

In Dublin, where Larian's publishing team is based, Douse took Vincke to a hip hop show and explained that, in each of their separate worlds, Larian and RAP Ferreira were doing the same thing. "They're trying to cut down distribution channels, they're trying to say exactly what they want to say to an audience that they know that they have, and they're coming up with the same lateral solutions that we are," Douse says. "This world of conscious hip hop and jazz and independent videogames have this weird connection. Luckily he got that, otherwise I would've looked like an idiot." ■

Jeremy Peel

RAP FOREVER

A potted history of hip hop in games



PARAPPA THE RAPPER

Considered the first ever rhythm game, *PaRappa* was inescapable in the late '90s. Paper-thin dogs remain a rarity among both videogame protagonists and rap stars.



DJ HERO

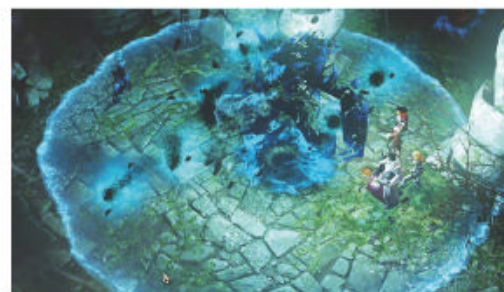
Focused on the production rather than the person on the mic, Activision's *Guitar Hero* follow-up was surprisingly legit – offering mixes from the likes of DJ Shadow.



50 CENT: BLOOD ON THE SAND

An unlikely third-person shooter in which G-Unit's payment for a show, a diamond-encrusted skull, is stolen by thieves.

“ON AN IDEAL DAY, I CAN LISTEN TO SOME RAP FERREIRA AND THEN GO TO A MEETING”



ABOVE: *Baldur's Gate III* is shaping up nicely in Steam early access.



LEFT: The first *Divinity: Original Sin* set the studio on a new path.

DNA Tracing

[[]] G'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

**FOR COLANTONIO AND
HIS PEERS, SOUND HAS
BEEN JUST AS
IMPORTANT AS SIGHT**

WOLF OUT THE DOOR

What happened when Arkane's founder went indie with **WOLF EYE STUDIOS**

If you were to play a word association game involving eerie frontier adventure *Weird West* – and the studio behind it, Wolfeye – you would pretty quickly arrive at the idea of ‘weird wolves’. It’s a term that could easily apply to the lycanthropes that hide among the game’s nascent, ramshackle communities as blacksmiths and bank tellers, or else terrorise the former as bandits. But it’s also a great band name.

As it happens, Weird Wolves is the performing name of Austin musician Ava Gore and Wolfeye’s creative director, Raphaël Colantonio. Their sound – or more pertinently, their mood – is at the very taproot of *Weird West*. It’s from there that the studio’s new game has sprouted, and from there that branches can be traced back over decades, all the way back to the beginnings of Arkane.

Soon after Colantonio and Wolfeye decided to blend Americana with the supernatural, he and Gore picked up their guitars and wrote a song called Ghost Voices. It was a simple but effective statement of intent: Colantonio’s dark, minor arpeggios on the electric guitar underpinning Gore’s sighing, wordless vocals, a *Where Is My Mind?* for the gold rush generation.

Having a unifying mood piece to work towards evidently helped Wolfeye’s team of two-score developers, split across four continents. Ghost Voices not only backed *Weird West*’s reveal trailer, but now doubles as its main menu music – matching the finished game just as well as it did that first concept.

Listen back through Colantonio’s games and you’ll find evidence of a similar approach. For *Prey: Mooncrash* – a project that coincided with his last days as Arkane’s president – he and Gore recorded *Realization*, an end credits song. While briefly comparable to Ghost Voices in

its zero-g guitar intro, *Realization* ultimately resolves into a pneumatic, industrial echoscape, perfectly reflective of *Prey*’s enjoyable space horror.

Players of *Dishonored 2*, meanwhile, might remember the lullaby sung by a witch through Dunwall’s loudspeaker system – a ghoulish ode to insurrection in a city commandeered by a force for chaos. It’s since been performed by Weird Wolves, though Colantonio and co allowed other instrumentalists to embody *Dishonored 2*’s street musicians. That’s wise, perhaps, in a game where any NPC is targetable with thrown bottles and fruit. Colantonio was brave enough, however, to put his own playing in *Arx Fatalis*. Throw a gemstone to the bard in Arkane’s debut and he’ll strum a characteristically mournful tune on his lute for you.

BAD GODS

Together, these appearances tell the story of a career in games intertwined with music. For Colantonio and his peers, sound has been just as important as sight – enabling the stealth and palpable atmosphere that became Arkane’s calling cards during Colantonio’s tenure. Each of these games is, in itself, a mood piece – a bath to sink into, allowing its strange waters to envelop your ears and change the way you hear until, at the end of a session, you emerge into the real world again.

Any Arkane fan who ducks their head into *Weird West* will see elements they recognise from the studio’s melancholic worlds. The outlaws drawn on wanted posters have a craggy quality – reminiscent of the many portraits hung around *Dishonored*’s courts and castles. Then there are the various otherworldly beings in human skin who interrupt your travels to ogle and interfere.

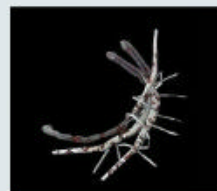
“All this so-called life, it’s no more than snatches of bad weather,” sighs a mysterious, dead-eyed girl. “Sky’s empty”

BELOW: Colantonio co-directed *Dishonored* with Harvey Smith.



ITEMS OF POWER

Where magic lives in Raf Colantonio’s games



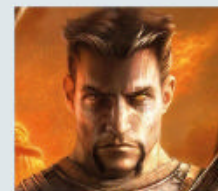
NIMP RELIC

These shards of bone once belonged to an ancient and absent species. Now they’re collected to unlock your abilities in *Weird West*.



BONE CHARM

Carved from whale bones, these witchy tokens are forbidden throughout *Dishonored*’s empire. But they’re handy upgrades.



SARETH

Dark Messiah of Might and Magic’s protagonist was in himself a receptacle, for a succubus who rattled around his head. Charming.

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

The extended travels of Colantonio and co

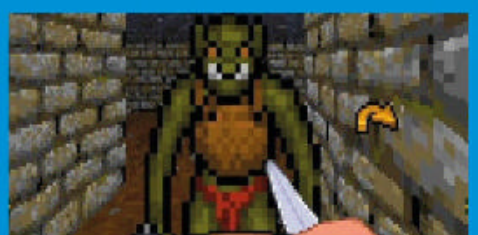
KEY

- Wolfeye Studios
- Arkane
- Origin Systems
- Looking Glass



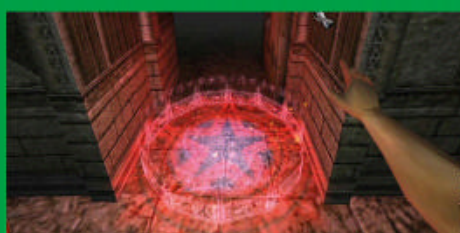
ULTIMA 7

A key inspiration for Arkane's dense interactivity.



ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

The first 3D immersive sim.



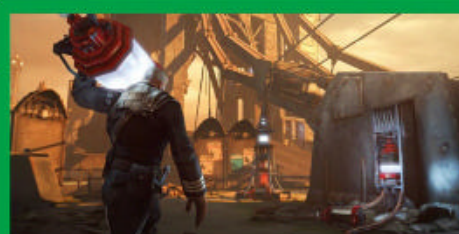
ARX FATALIS

Colantonio's intended *Ultima Underworld 3*.



DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

Flawed, barrel-flipping physics fun.



DISHONORED

Arkane's breakthrough, with Bethesda's backing.



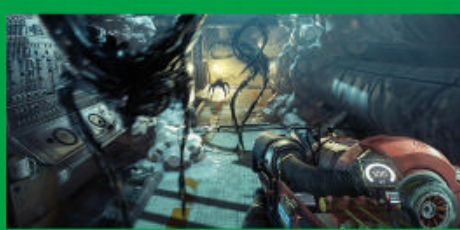
DISHONORED 2

Deus Ex's Harvey Smith flew solo as director.



DEATHLOOP

The im-sim as successful shooter.



PREY

Colantonio's return to an *Arx*-style single, sprawling dungeon.



WEIRD WEST

Colantonio's first indie outing has big *Ultima 7* energy.



» behind it, a vast nothing – that’s where I live.” It’s an aloof existential attitude that fans will associate with the Outsider, *Dishonored*’s plain-yet-uncanny emissary from the Void. Later, *Weird West* introduces Heathen, a transient witch. “Just promise me this,” she says. “Keep being interesting, old friend.” Human drama as light entertainment: the Outsider would be proud. In the minds of Colantonio and his colleagues, the gods are neither benign nor malevolent – they’re simply bored.

As in *Dishonored*, most of the locals of *Weird West* worship more sensible deities – designated to protect their crops and grant them a painless passing. But while these beings are nowhere to be seen, the supernatural meddlers run rampant, their influence empirically observable. Creepy, nest-like shrines sit in hidden places, and glowing bone charms unlock ancient power. In both games, art and magic are presented as a dangerous temptation in opposition to order – always alluring, but intrinsically associated with death.

BRAIN FOOD

Of course, *Weird West*’s links to Colantonio and co’s prior games go deeper than the story. Unusually for an isometric game, levels are littered with vertiginous alternative paths. Even the caves have side-routes, while the towns invite you to creep across rooftops and clamber through windows – either to get the jump on your targets or to bypass locks and complete your objectives non-lethally. As in *Deus Ex*, a house lets you into the brain of the character who owns it – and the basement typically hides their most deeply suppressed and sickening secrets.

On the subject of brains, one plot-critical character let me know that only his cerebral organ need make it to our shared destination – which was just as well, since he was swept up and killed by a tornado on the road just an hour



later. My party duly scooped out his brain and carried it across wide desert plains to the quest giver – who, against all odds, knew what to do with it. This kind of spontaneous event, and *Weird West*’s capacity to incorporate its effects without batting an eye, is a trademark characteristic of the immersive sim – the genre that Arkane, and now Wolfeye, have dedicated themselves to.

In fact, *Weird West* functions as one long (and strong) argument that a game doesn’t have to be first-person to meet the genre’s criteria. Back in 2020, Colantonio tweeted a challenge: “Fight me about immersive sims not

being possible in top down!”. Given how powerfully *Weird West* makes the case – not to mention the muscles on display in Colantonio’s band promo shots – I don’t expect he’ll find many fighters willing to face him. ■

Jeremy Peel

THE GODS ARE NEITHER BENIGN NOR MALEVOLENT – THEY’RE BORED

ABOVE: *Dark Messiah* is *Weird West*’s equal in environmental chaos.

Witches have followed Colantonio from *Dishonored* to *Weird West*.



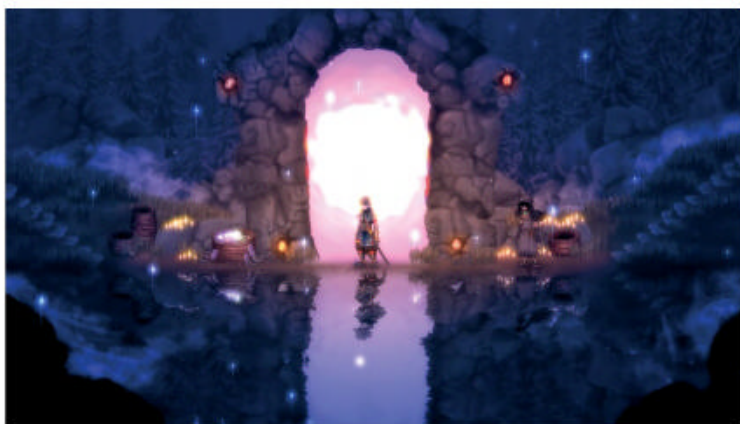
1 month



WH40K: CHAOS GATE – DAEMONHUNTERS

RELEASE May 5 | **DEVELOPER** Complex Games

'Warhammer meets XCOM' is a pitch sure to get mouths watering around our office, and what we've seen of the crunchy, tactical action has been very promising.



SALT AND SACRIFICE

RELEASE May 10 | **DEVELOPER** Devoured Studios

Hunt monstrous mages as someone named the 'Marked Inquisitor' in this confident follow-up to the hit 2D *Souls*-like *Salt and Sanctuary*.



EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

RELEASE May 13 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

Bruce Campbell reprises his iconic role in this game adaptation of the cult film series. Expect *Left 4 Dead*-esque co-op and PvP gameplay, though you can play solo too.

3 months



STEELRISING

RELEASE June | **DEVELOPER** Spiders

Scrappy RPG developer Spiders is back with a strange clockpunk tale that sees you playing a robotic woman fighting her way through Paris during the French Revolution.



THE QUARRY

RELEASE June 10 | **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games

A spiritual successor to *Until Dawn* that sticks close to the same horror tropes, with a new gang of horny teens ready to be terrorised by mysterious killers in the woods.



STARSHIP TROOPERS - TERRAN COMMAND

RELEASE June 16 | **DEVELOPER** The Aristocrats

Is an RTS game a suitable vehicle for the original film's brand of biting satire? We're not sure – but it looks like either way it'll be fun to blast hordes of bugs to bits.

6 months



SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 23 | **DEVELOPER** Volition

After recent entries escalated to alien invasions, virtual worlds, and a trip to actual Hell, this reboot is bringing things back down to earth with a new cast of trendy criminal hipsters.



FORSPOKEN

RELEASE October 11 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has save the world.



GOTHAM KNIGHTS

RELEASE October 25 | **DEVELOPER** Warner Bros Games Montreal

A co-op game in the style of the *Arkham* series, but starring all of Batman's friends instead of the man himself, and with a generous sprinkling of RPG elements.

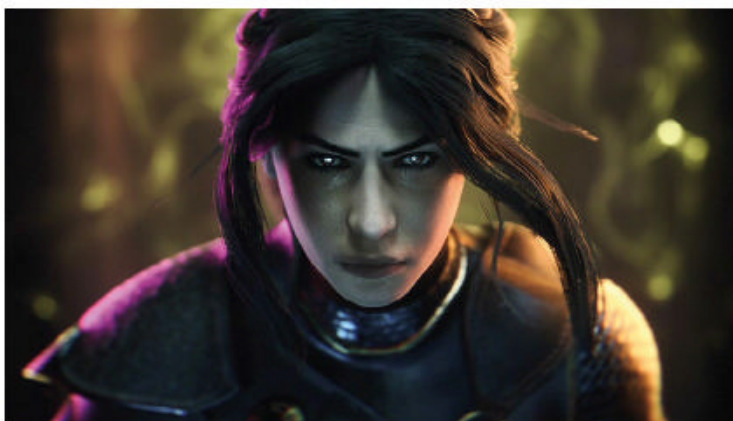
12 months+



STARFIELD

RELEASE November 11 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

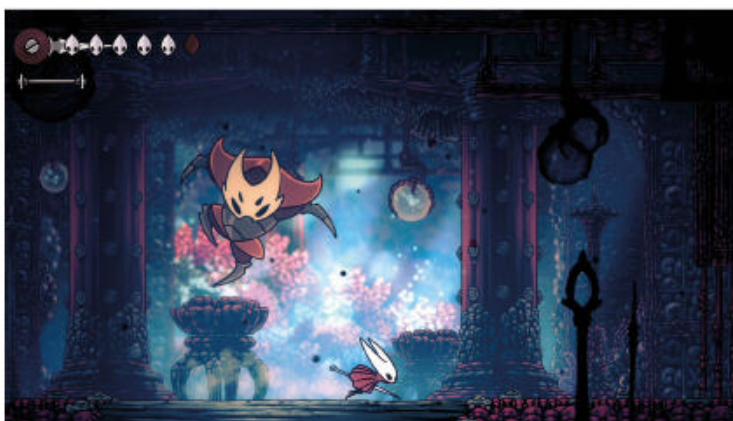
It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new singleplayer RPG – but if *'Skyrim in space'* can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The creators of *XCOM* get experimental with a turn-based RPG starring the superheroes of the Marvel universe, alongside your own customisable main character.



HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

RELEASE TBC | **DEVELOPER** Team Cherry

Come on, surely 2022 is the year we finally get this long-anticipated follow-up to one of the best indie Metroidvanias ever made? Please?

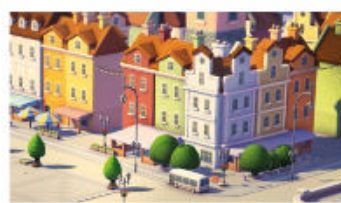
DELAYED

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Rocksteady has delayed its long-awaited followup to the *Batman: Arkham* series to spring 2023, promising "the time is going into making the best game we can".





Two Point Campus

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 9, 2022

DEVELOPER
Two Point Studios

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
twopointcampus.com

TWO POINT
CAMPUS

Two Point Hospital's follow-up takes us back to school

Education is the foundation of our society. Students are expected to get great marks through primary, secondary, and for some, higher education too. As a student I diligently concentrated on my grades... sometimes. But as an institutional boss in *Two Point Campus*, I was more concerned with placing the staff room dart board.

Two Point Campus puts you in the shoes of a school administrator looking to build the best educational environment possible for the students of Two Point County. You'll have to cater to their wants and needs, from library desks to food vendors. Balancing work and play for both teachers and students is of the utmost importance. And although you may get yourself into debt, see some students drop out, and struggle to keep your staff energised, it's still a lot of fun.

I started my journey in Freshleigh Meadows, a small town college where "life moves slowly and expectations are... lowly". This is the perfect place to start your career as a campus administrator. You're trying your best and that's all that matters. As long as you give these students the basics and a dollop of goodwill, they're happy to take a chance on your budding career.

TWO THE POINT

First thing's first, you need a course to teach. There isn't much point in having a college without something to learn, is

there? The courses of *Two Point Campus* aren't exactly conventional either. Scientography, as you may have guessed it from the name, is science in an unusual format. It's not the usual sitting around with Bunsen burners and litmus tests – rather your students crowd around a gargantuan flask-shaped machine with far too many buttons and have a go pressing them. A giant hammer whacks away at the flask while multicoloured steam (or is that smoke?) plumes from its spout. That's the science I wish I took at school.

When I asked Ben Huskins, the design director at Two Point Studios, and senior producer Jo Koehler about creating these courses and their interpretations, they reference the absurd medical conditions *Two Point's* last game, *Two Point Hospital*, tackled, like Denim Jean or Shock Horror. Huskins says, "Obviously with *Two Point Hospital* it's all slightly, well completely bonkers. And so we asked, what's the equivalent of that? As we started making *Campus* it felt like the courses were the obvious place to give us that scope for having some courses that feel more grounded in reality, like Scientography.

The reason we put that at the start of the game was that everyone recognises science and thinks about having science classes at school, but let's put a bit of twist on it. And then as the game progresses we gradually get introduced to the even more weird and wonderful courses."

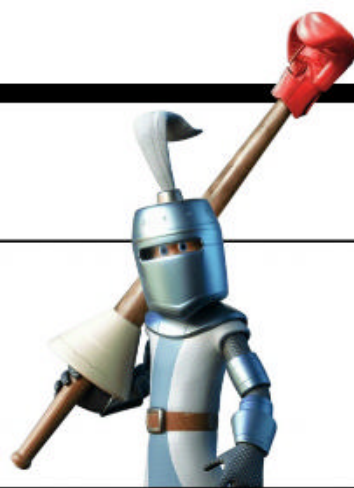
I only managed to get a sneak peak at Scientography and Gastronomy, but I was assured by the team that the studies of students continue to get more wacky, such as Knight School, where your scholars will learn to joust.

For now, though, Scientography is my focus. I was quickly put to work designing a room with all the necessary equipment. A board for calculations and the aforementioned flask machine. But that's not all a college needs, is it? I need a dormitory for students to get their beauty sleep in, a bathroom and shower for hygiene and, of course, snacks to keep their energy up. Freshleigh Meadows is already looking pretty swish and I'm on a roll. Bins, plants, lockers, oh and let's give the students a library too. In their downtime the population should also have a place to socialise so a student lounge is a

PLAYED
IT

**I WAS QUICKLY PUT TO WORK
DESIGNING A ROOM WITH ALL
THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT**

Two Point Campus



➤ must, complete with dart board and perhaps a pinball machine if I'm feeling generous. Yes, that'll do nicely. Class grades are rising, as is the mood, and that's a success in my eyes. Just don't look at my bank account.

My campus is hustling and bustling. It's gone from sleepy to full on curriculum chaos. Koehler talks about some of the animations that go into making the game feel like this, saying that the team were given very little direction, and just understood the concepts right away. She says, "They're so fun, there are so many tiny little animations that if you just look at what's happening in front of you in play, everything is really spot on."

Amusingly, when I asked the team about the first level's setting, it turns out Freshleigh Meadows was based on a real place. Huskins and Koehler revealed that the location was based on an artist's home town from when he grew up. Huskins laughs, "In fact we had a meeting and we went on Google Street View to where he grew up and then we were like, 'Hang on a sec, there's the canal.'"

MERRY OLD ENGLAND

That classic Britishness flows through *Two Point Campus*. It had been a long time since I'd heard someone say "bully for you" before this hands-on, for one. Although there are masses of Americanisms in aesthetics, from lockers to sports flags, deep down *Two Point Campus* is hilariously British.

Huskins says, "The game is inevitably going to have that British twist on it just because of who we are and the sorts of things that we do. I mean *Two Point Campus* itself is meant to be a bit of a mix of lots of different DNA. As you progress through the game you get to go to different locations. And so although you start off with this very quintessential British rural area you jump around the map of new and old locations established by *Hospital*. And not all of them have that British feel to them, but you've still got the radio and the announcer."

As I'm toiling away on my campus, assiduously placing posters of fictional pop-stars and frowning at smelly students yet to take a shower, the radio and Tannoy

system in the game are throwing out jokes and jibes. Contact lenses lost in lasagnas, mystery radio plays about world class detectives, and tannoy reminders reminding students to set reminders are all on the menu. I chuckled along in between the jovial tunes and snappy clips and clops of placing and moving my newly purchased furniture.

The team at Two Point had already thought about their next game as they worked on *Hospital*, and a school management sim felt right as the next step. "We have loads of different ideas for potential *Two Point* games now", Huskins says. "I remember while we were making *Two Point Hospital*, we had a list on a whiteboard. But we latched onto that education setting partly because it felt like a great opportunity to get to know some of these characters better. Students are going to spend that bit longer with you than a patient within a hospital.

"We also felt like it was a cool setting from the point of view of, everyone's got some experience of education. Even if they didn't go to college or university, everyone's got those memories from their eccentric teacher or that classmate that used to eat crayons."

"It's relatable, isn't it?", Koehler adds. And I couldn't agree more.

SCHOOL DAZE

Playing just a little bit of *Two Point Campus* did make me think back to my school and university experience. Even though a sim is very different to attending classes and studying, I did want to provide a great college experience to these students. Oh and nothing was more relatable than finding myself in some debt I was struggling to pay off, am I right student loan companies?

Plainly, from what I experienced, *Two Point Campus* is shaping up to be a tightly knit bundle of fun. As someone unfamiliar with the systems of *Two Point Hospital*, for example, the mechanics were clear and I could instantly see myself losing so much time managing these little campuses. The pride I felt when a room came out the way I wanted it to was splendid. And the jigsaw-like fitting of elements together was impressive. When I asked myself if I could fit a plant in the corner, a drinking fountain on the wall, or a bench by a tree, the answer was yes. That satisfaction of seeing your vision for a room come to life and seeing these little people use it as intended was just swell.

Imogen Mellor



You'd think culinary students could make their own food and drinks.

THE GAME IS INEVITABLY GOING TO HAVE THAT BRITISH TWIST ON IT



ABOVE: You see, the food is comically oversized. A classic comedy formula.

LEFT: Yeah, that's exactly what nights out at my university looked like.

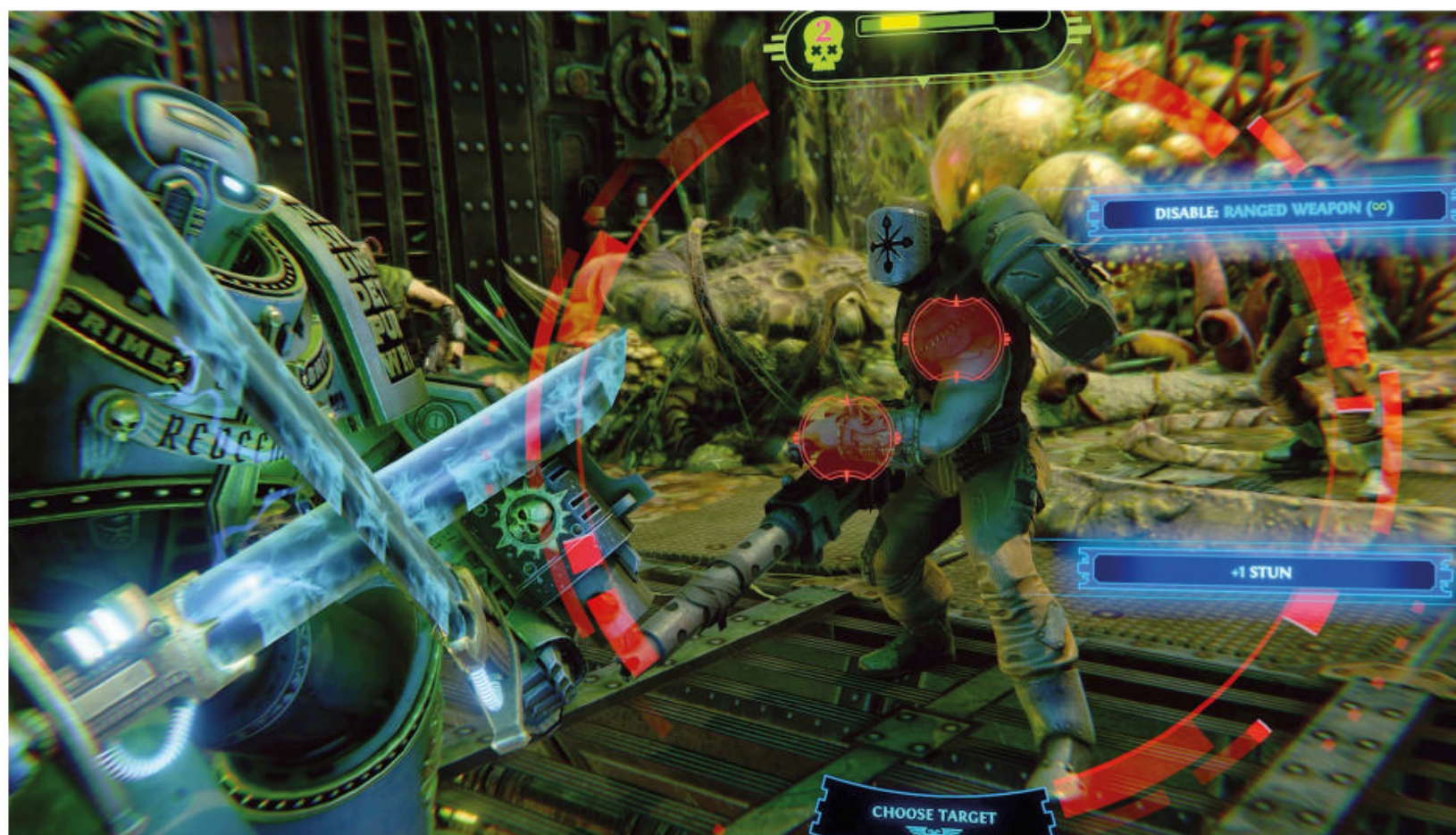
PREVIEW

Warhammer 40K: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters

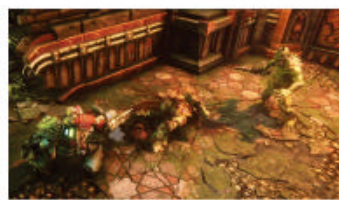


ABOVE: Wrist-mounted guns are great if you've got carpal tunnel syndrome.

RIGHT: There are quite a few ways to murder people at close range.



Warhammer 40K: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 5

DEVELOPER
Complex Games

PUBLISHER
Frontier Foundry

LINK
chaosgate.com

WARHAMMER 40K: CHAOS GATE – DAEMONHUNTERS

Curing a plague with fire and bullets

There's something very cathartic about playing *Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters*, a turn-based tactics romp with Space Marines tackling their own equivalent of a pandemic by beating the shit out of it. Bolters, flamethrowers, and heavy boots are very effective remedies, it turns out.

Here's the setup: you're in command of the Grey Knights, a Space Marine chapter full of Chaos-crushing zealots with a penchant for psychic assaults. They're called into action because a plague is spreading across the galaxy, the Bloom, courtesy of the Chaos god Nurgle and his grotesque minions. Thus begins a planet-hopping campaign where you'll determine the fate of entire worlds.

For this demo, though, the focus is the missions themselves: three of them, each with different objectives and some premade squads. There's my Justicar with his intimidating doom lance, and my relentless Interceptor who can teleport around the battlefield, getting right in the enemy's face with his big ol' sword. When my lads take too much of a beating, I've got an Apothecary who can summon his servitor to flit off and mend his broken pals. And in the final battle I get my hands on a bloke with a flamethrower, purging the toxic battlefields with waves of fire.

The lack of RNG means that I can be more sure of my tactics than I would be in

XCOM. My choice of weapon, range, and position all inform how much damage I'm going to do, and there's plenty to consider, but I always know how effective my attack will be before I commit.

POWER UP

If your attack isn't quite strong enough to end a foe, you can always call on the powers of the warp, buffing the attack with your force of will. Sometimes this just means more damage, but it can also introduce new status effects. It's handy, but there's a big cost, increasing the likelihood of a Chaos event, potentially forcing you to deal with buffed enemies or more reinforcements.

Despite making some mistakes in the rush to see everything before the end of the demo, I manage to get through the first couple of missions without too much trouble. Though, I leave the worlds in a worse state than I found them. I'm a big fan of how much both players and the AI can manipulate and morph the battlefield, bringing down pillars on top of unfortunate troops, leaving craters everywhere, bathing the ground in poison and fire.

PLAYED IT

Cover is important, but it's fleeting – you always need to keep moving as the map transforms around you.

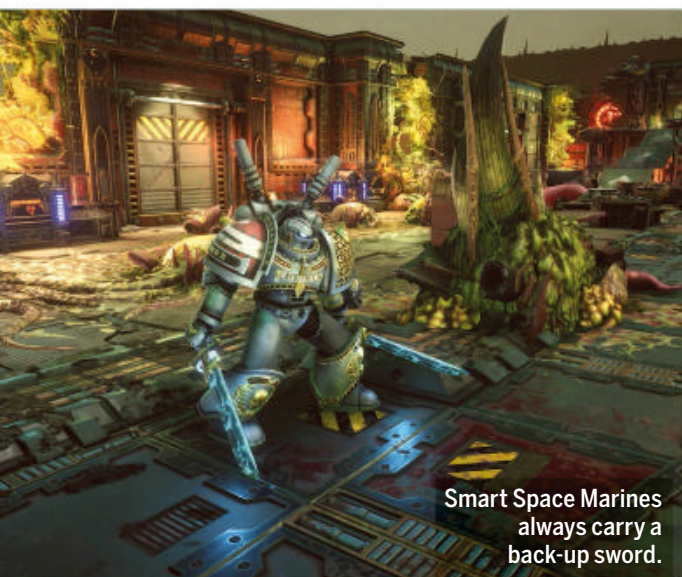
Things go south when I jump into the final demo mission: a boss fight against a massive Great Unclean One. The real enemy here, though, is inconsistency. The main sources of frustration are toxic streams that my Space Marines can't jump over despite previous missions establishing their ability to jump very far, and irritating enemies that inexplicably can't be targeted directly and can only be burned with the flamethrower.

I didn't have time to finish the fight and, frankly, I was happy to have an out. The other missions made me want to play more, but the boss fight's high points were buried under the annoyances. Hopefully it's not indicative of the rest of them.

The real measure of *Daemonhunters* won't be apparent until we see how it all comes together – the cosmic campaign, the progression of your growing squad, the big decisions about what crises to prioritise. It's built on solid ground, though, and has oodles of character, so there are plenty of reasons to be hopeful.

By Fraser Brown

YOU ALWAYS NEED TO KEEP MOVING AS THE MAP TRANSFORMS AROUND YOU



Smart Space Marines always carry a back-up sword.

PREVIEW

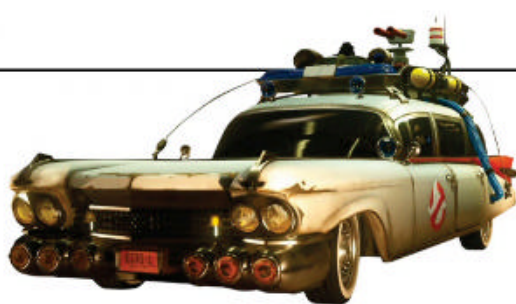
Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed



ABOVE: The ghost can spawn minions to discombobulate Ghostbusters.

RIGHT: Finding a ghost with a PKE Meter is less science, more pseudoscience.



Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
IllfonicPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
ghostbusterssu.comGHOSTBUSTERS:
SPIRITS
UNLEASHED

A slimy but surprisingly clever take on 4v1 multiplayer

I'm no ghost scientist, but there are a few things I'm confident ghosts do: spin office chairs as a gag, fry electronics at the worst times, and make soda machines eject cans like fizzy ballistic missiles. I was able to do all three in *Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed*, so at the very least it passes my amateur ghostology test with slimy colours.

Ghostbusters is Illfonic's third licensed, 4v1 multiplayer game after *Friday the 13th* and *Predator: Hunting Grounds*. While the first two have come and gone while *Dead by Daylight* keeps on trucking and *Left 4 Dead 2* settles into old age, I don't think *Ghostbusters* is really trying to supplant either. This time Illfonic's really doing its own thing, making an asymmetrical game where one team never gets torn limb from limb.

Illfonic told me that one of the most common bits of feedback from players is how it's not fun to get taken out early in a match, so they modelled *Ghostbusters* after the scene in the first film where the 'busters chase Slimer through the hotel (and blast housekeeping carts and chandeliers along the way). Slimer's just causing mayhem, so in the game the ghost's objective is to scare hapless NPCs while the Ghostbusters try to catch them.

As a ghost I couldn't kill the Ghostbusters, but I could use abilities to slime them, mess with their proton packs, or briefly scare them into an incapacitated

state. I haunted objects to spook NPCs while trying to manage my ectoplasm meter. I could chill out in a vending machine or a statue to regenerate, but staying there too long meant I was risking a Ghostbuster coming with their PKE meter raised to sniff me out.

The ghost is slippery, but if a couple Ghostbusters team up you can quickly be pulled into a trap and caught. But dying once as the ghost isn't the end. You have three 'rifts' hidden around the map to respawn from. There's a clever cat and mouse twist here, in that the Ghostbusters can find and destroy your rifts, too. The ghost can move their rifts, while the 'busters have to split their attention between hunting the ghost and calming down anxious NPCs.

THAT'S THE SPIRIT

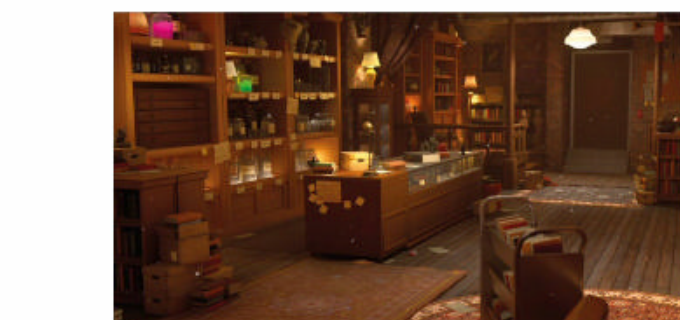
Playing first-person as a Ghostbuster, the proton beam has the physicality it does in the movies, writhing like an angry energy snake. Elsewhere there's still fine-tuning to be done. I had to use the mouse wheel to shorten or lengthen the beam to position a ghost over a trap, but I kept swiping the wheel before fully ensnaring a ghost and swapping to my PKE meter instead. As the ghost I had trouble spotting objects I could inhabit: I wouldn't have minded ghost-o-vision highlighting every interactable.

There's too much button mashing to evade a trap or shake off a ghost's slime: those could have more interesting mechanics. *Spirits Unleashed* feels a bit generic in some of these finer details, but Illfonic still has ample time to work on it.

The developer promises a range of ghosts, along with a progression system that lets you unlock both cosmetics and equipment for the Ghostbusters and alternate abilities for the ghosts. There's also a story to follow, delivered by original actors Dan Aykroyd and Ernie Hudson. It's hard to judge how much staying power *Spirits Unleashed* will have, but it feels like it could become a recurring weeknight Discord pick: the lighter, less intense game you pile into when you need a break from your main squeeze. It's a pleasant surprise that a new *Ghostbusters* game in 2022 is a smart use of the licence, not just a nostalgic cash-in.

Wes Fenlon

AS A GHOST I COULDN'T KILL THE GHOSTBUSTERS, BUT I COULD SLIME THEM



PREVIEW

Star Trek: Resurgence



ABOVE: A warp engine experiment gone awry is causing chaos.

RIGHT: How has Starfleet *still* not figured out seatbelts?





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Dramatic Labs

PUBLISHER
Epic Games

LINK
startrek-resurgence.com

STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

The diplomatic heart of '90s Trek finally makes a comeback

Halfway through Discovery's first season, I accepted that it wasn't my kind of Star Trek. The modern series' grim war felt tonally off for a series that's always been about exploration and humanity, and when it *did* spend time on its crew, the melodrama dial was stuck at 11. Good or bad, it wasn't my Trek.

I had the opposite experience when I played a new demo of *Star Trek: Resurgence*, a story-focused adventure from former Telltale developers at new studio Dramatic Labs. Within five minutes, *Resurgence*'s captain was lamenting a catastrophic warp core malfunction and dropping technobabble like "10,000 teradynes per second" while he stared out a viewport. Twenty minutes later and the senior officers were sitting across a table from Ambassador Spock, talking about their mission to negotiate peace between two alien races. Diplomacy was the obvious answer, but what type of diplomacy? A polite debate ensued. Good or bad, this is definitely my kind of Star Trek.

Resurgence gives off big TNG vibes, and not just because it's set a couple years after *Nemesis*, the final TNG film. A Telltale-style adventure seems like a perfect mould for Star Trek: the best episodes of the TV shows are about characters solving problems together, grappling with their own weaknesses, or solving some quirky sci-fi mystery. Character drama, lots of dialogue, puzzle solving – yep, that's an adventure game.

A TELLTALE-STYLE ADVENTURE SEEMS LIKE A PERFECT MOULD FOR STAR TREK

The demo was just 30 minutes, which covered introductions to the main cast and not much more. I swapped between the perspectives of incoming first officer Jara and young engineer Carter Diaz, with subtle dialogue options that let you nudge their personalities rather than going full *Paragon* or *Renegade*. If you appreciated the range of emotions Jean-Luc Picard could express with a frown, you'll also vibe with how much *Resurgence* is focused on capturing the nuances of Star Trek chat.

ALL TALK

The developers told me that the full game will have some actiony bits too, but in the demo I didn't do much more than walk a few feet. I hope there's more opportunity to explore the ship in the full game, which sounds like it'll be equivalent to a full Telltale season, which the dev equated to a Trek miniseries in length.

Though *Resurgence*'s tone is exactly what I want out of Star Trek, I'm worried the developer isn't going to have quite the time or budget it deserves here.

Dramatic Labs is using Unreal Engine and opted for a realistic art style that

stumbles into the uncanny valley.

The facial animations aren't bad, but have a robotic quality you don't see in today's luxuriously motion captured games – they remind me of the first couple *Mass Effects*, now well-over a decade old.

Likewise, the walking animations have an awkwardness to them that feels mismatched with the fidelity *Resurgence* is shooting for. These flaws stand out more in a realistic game than in the comic book style Telltale used for so many years.

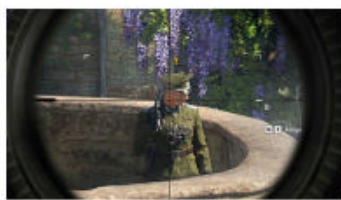
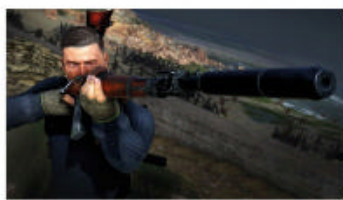
Resurgence isn't finished, of course, and there's time left to smooth out the most noticeable flaws. But the developers said the animation is close to where they want it to be, so I'm not expecting a dramatic transformation between now and release later this year. I can look past some goofy moments if the rest of *Resurgence* is as promising as it seems, though – even The Next Generation open palm slammed the silliness button every few episodes. TV Star Trek may no longer feel like the '90s Trek I loved, but *Resurgence* is doing its best to warp headfirst into that void.

Wes Fenlon



The voice actor does an uncanny Spock – I bet even Nimoy would've been fooled.

PLAYED
IT

Sniper Elite 5

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 26, 2022

DEVELOPER
Rebellion Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
sniperelitegames.com

SNIPER ELITE 5

Bringing history to life, and then making it very dead

Lieutenant Karl Fairburne is nothing if not a professional. A deep grizzled voice that would make any 1940s woman swoon, short back and sides haircut, and far too many pockets – you can tell he's a man on a world-changing mission. Even if he has just accidentally fired his pistol into the ground, alerting several nearby Nazis to his position.

I swear at myself in frustration while launching over a countryside fence and running into a patch of long grass to evade my pursuers. Crouching down, I steady my breath as the guards anxiously amble over. That was a very stupid move... but I can't help but laugh.

Sniper Elite 5 is the latest game in the World War II shooter series from Rebellion. Although solidly set in the serious events surrounding the conflict, with your American James Bond-esque infiltrator Karl on vital missions for the Allies, there's plenty of goofy fun to be had while popping Nazis. Gaining crucial information to support the war effort is the aim of the game, but aiming at fascist crotches and shooting their nards off is certainly a perk of the job.

The form and function of *Sniper Elite 5* do feel a little at odds, but that's really the pleasure of the series for anyone but the most hardcore military history buff. Though very po-faced in form, the function is to make you laugh and feel ultimately satisfied by pulling off your most ridiculous plans. The game wears a frowning Greek tragedy mask, but the

SOMETHING CALLED PROJECT KRAKEN IS RUMOURED TO BE THE NAZIS' NEXT BIG MOVE

performer underneath is giggling along with you, enjoying its time gallivanting around the stage. You're encouraged to play however you want. And how I like playing *Sniper Elite* is by going with the flow, no matter how silly that flow gets.

What's made the *Sniper Elite* series stand out over the years, in a sea of World War II based shooters from *Call of Duty* to *Medal of Honor*, is that when you pull off shots and kills, you're rewarded with a slow-motion, hyper-realistic shot of your bullet entering, damaging, and killing your opponent, with glorious X-ray so you can see every detail. While as a sniper you spend most of the time shooting at heads, you can also kill with shots to other parts of the body... like the crown jewels. The drama this invests in even the most wince-inducing shots is a treat.

It's a little crass, and even gross, but mostly it's very funny. Even when hard-ass Lieutenant Fairburne is taking his job very seriously, there's a flair and sense of humour to be found in every scenario. To be that stoic and focused, and then to canonically shoot your enemy in the groin just has a certain comic *je ne sais quoi*.

And you get ample points for defeating your enemies in any way you can find, so balls to the walls is practically encouraged.

PLAYED
IT

GUNNING FOR SUCCESS

My hands-on preview certainly gives me plenty of opportunities to embrace both the serious and the silly. The setting of the mission at hand sees Lieutenant Fairburne hot on the tail of a Nazi plan. Something called Project Kraken is rumoured to be the Nazis' next big move, and I need to find and prevent whatever atrocities the rotters are cooking up in their war crime kitchen. To do so, I need to infiltrate a French chateau, heavily guarded by soldiers, at posts and on patrol with keen eyes and ears at the ready. Karl's foiled Nazi plans before and they cannot risk it happening again.

My journey starts with whispering amongst French rebels with rifles and perfectly rolled cigarettes in hand. They've heard murmurs of this potential plan but need to know exact details. The Nazi in charge has already moved on from this site, but has hopefully left ample documents behind to inform my next



Charlie Chaplin off out to do some shopping.





ABOVE: Lieutenant Karl Fairburne is more machine than man.

LEFT: Elbow pads aren't just for geography teachers.

PREVIEW

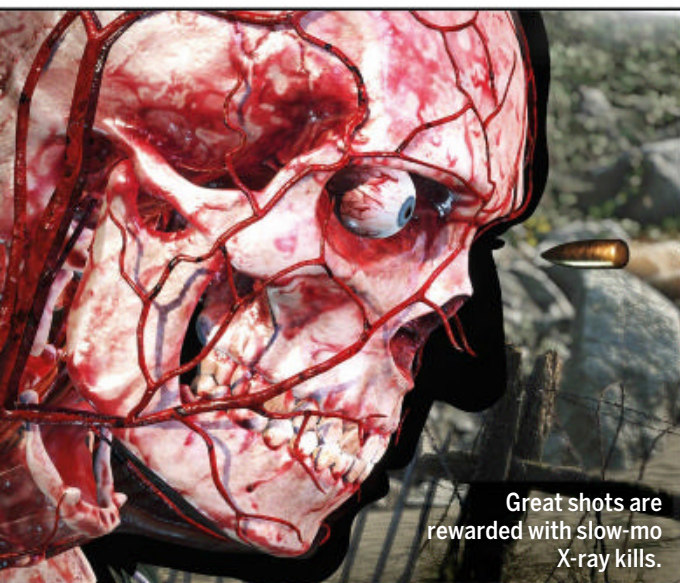
Sniper Elite 5



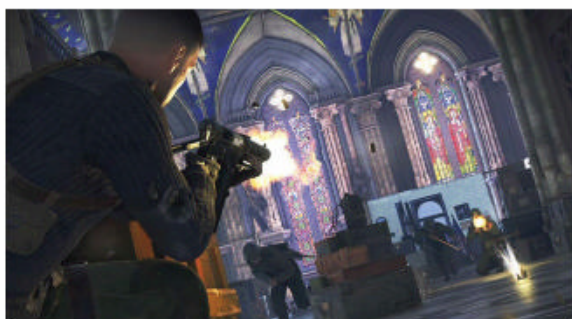
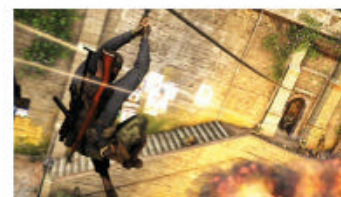
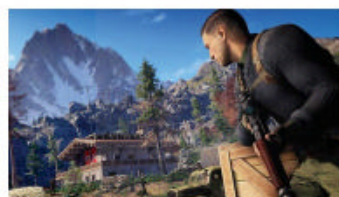
RIGHT: That's how you travel in style.

BELOW: Something tells me this guard post isn't going to be guarded much longer.





Great shots are rewarded with slow-mo X-ray kills.



» move. And hey, even if this whole infiltration business is a bust, at least I'll get to do a little murder on the side, right? So off I go, Nazi hunting.

Immediately as I start sneaking towards the chateau, *Sniper Elite 5* feels like an upgrade over *Sniper Elite 4*. The visuals, the sound, the AI of the enemies – it's all sharper, more realistic, and more satisfying. Where *Sniper Elite 4* enemies would just mill about in the last place they saw you, *Sniper Elite 5*'s AI assumes I'm still in the area and continues its pursuit just that little bit further. If I hideously cock up my plans, I really have to wait for a chance to try it all again, or just completely reevaluate. When attempting a breach of the chateau, for example, I die several times attempting one approach before calling it quits because loud or quiet, the patrols and placements of the guards are woven tightly enough to foil my plans.

Though not a puzzle game in the traditional point-and-click sense, *Sniper Elite 5* is already setting me brain teasers. Risk discovery for a quieter way into a secret room, or blow the bloody doors off? Kill the guard on higher ground, eliminating the potential for him to spot me, or risk the closer target out of ease? Go through the main doors of a complex or slink my way to tunnels which will be harder to access if I'm found out once inside? They're tricky tactical choices.

WHO YOU GONNA KARL?

You can save scum (I certainly recommend manually saving your game frequently) if you're keen to explore every option presented to you. Rebellion has no problem with fans changing their minds all the time, that's apparent – it just wants to maximise fun. But these options make the levels, even just the one I get to try, highly replayable. You'll want to give each area another shot (pun intended) to discover what you might have missed. Or maybe try for some of those subtler kill opportunities that you only noticed after you'd already downed everyone with bollock shots.

You can go very subtle indeed, in fact, because *Sniper Elite 5* features *Hitman*-esque 'accidents' you can use to take enemies out non-lethally. However, if I'm

being candid, I'm not exactly sure of the advantage. The resulting kill cams are less bombastic, and it's not really like I feel too bad about killing a dozen Nazis here and there on my way to find an A4 sheet of paper anyway. At the end of the level there is a chart to show you how loud or quiet you were, as well as lethal or non-lethal. I'm sure there will eventually be challenge runs the community constructs around the idea of these post-release, but like the niche 2011 horror film *Silent but Deadly* I aimed to be umm... silent but deadly.

But being stealthy doesn't mean there isn't a little room for fun. Taking a level on outpost by outpost means that you can go a bit gung ho on occasion. Sniper rifles themselves happen to be blooming loud, and in this chateau level, there isn't a lot of sound cover to use to disguise the shot. Instead I use the approach of slowly picking off enemies with melee attacks, before running back out to the French fields and destroying the last target in the area with my sniper rifle. If a sniper shoots his gun and no one is around to hear it, does it even make a sound?

RIFLING THROUGH

On top of the obvious sniper rifles, *Sniper Elite 5* will have a selection of fan favourite pistols, explosives, rifles, SMGs, and more from previous games, and thanks to workbenches dotted around each level, you'll be able to swap your loadout around mid-mission. You can already pick up the guns and gear of some of the soldiers you kill as you go, but the workbenches add another layer of freedom, allowing you to always give those Nazis the personal touch.

If your interest is piqued by *Sniper Elite 5* ahead of the May release date, I'd recommend trying out *Sniper Elite 4*. Though 5 is prettier, crunchier and full of quality-of-life improvements, it does feel like there is an assumption as you play that you'll have seen and felt the series' style before. Between 4 and 5 controls have been made more responsive, the vaulting is more intuitive, and the routes through the level more cleverly guided, to the point that you often feel like you've discovered each path organically. But knowing how to calculate potential bullet drop or what weaponry is worth picking up from dead Nazis feels like presumed knowledge, and anyone who hasn't tried 4 may find themselves fumbling a little with the finer details. Consider this a warning to do your history homework now.

Imogen Mellor

THE PATROLS OF THE GUARDS ARE WOVEN TIGHTLY ENOUGH TO FOIL MY PLANS

Trek to Yomi

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
Leonard MenchiariPUBLISHER
Devolver DigitalLINK
devolverdigital.com

TREK TO YOMI

Captures the style, but not the spirit, of an iconic film director

Trek to Yomi's demo makes it clear that the team behind the game are not only in love with legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa: they've also spent a considerable amount of time studying his work, from *Seven Samurai* to *Yojimbo*. Every monochrome area is a feast for the eyes.

Flashes of lightning flood the sky with intense bloom, and foreground scenery is skilfully used to convey a sense of cave-bound claustrophobia, or focus your attention on a particular part of the screen. Wherever you look you'll find faux film grain and digital dirt. There's a texture and life to every scene.

Unfortunately something else became obvious as I played through this side-on sword fighting adventure: copying Kurosawa's visual style doesn't translate to earning any of his films' depth or meaning.

Trek to Yomi kicks off with a familiar premise: an orphaned boy grows into a tough-looking hero with a shiny sword, the only man in the entire village capable of fighting an endless supply of nigh-identical bandits. I don't mind the simplicity, necessarily. What I do mind is that the creative well it's exclusively drawing from tells tales of class wars, politics, and the abuse of power – and seemingly the developer seemingly looked at all that and just said, "Cool swords, bro."

There's nothing wrong with cool swords! But the game straddles an awkward middle ground. It never commits

to being a katana-laden brawler that puts its influences to one side for the sake of some all-out sword fighting, but nor does it have the nuance to properly emulate its cinematic inspirations, where a drawn blade is the last resort of a desperate man.

Trek to Yomi idolises the fictionalised concept of samurai as brave and noble defenders of the people, then presents lead hero Hiroki with at least two opportunities to kill groups of enemies with staged environmental hazards in the demo alone, bushido be damned.

SLICE OF LIFE

Combat has some heft, but offers chain combos and health upgrades in place of the gut-wrenching mind games in the best film duels. No attempt has been made to convey the tension preceding the all-or-nothing slices of samurai cinema. I don't feel like I can try to psych out my opponents, or that a fight hinges on maintaining the perfect distance before a strike as the wind howls around me.

Counter > X > X, watch your stamina gauge, repeat four times until the next checkpoint. Toshiro Mifune never did that, or anything that looked like it.

The locations these moments take place in are always framed by whatever camera angle makes them look closest to the films they're inspired, by regardless of how practical that may be for the player. At times it leaves you fighting a grey man who might be all of an inch high against a grey background, even though consistently countering his tiny sword may be key to your continued existence. At other times a distracting full-screen film effect appears moments before a duel starts, as if the virtual reel's being changed for the beginning of the fight choreography, even though no serious film director would ever tolerate such amateurish cuts.

Trek to Yomi seems to hope players will be too awed by the visuals to notice what they've actually been given is an ordinary action-slasher experience. The comparisons to landmark moments in cinematic history – comparisons *Trek to Yomi* has invited upon itself – only serve to highlight how far off the game is from capturing the spirit of the films the developers clearly adore.

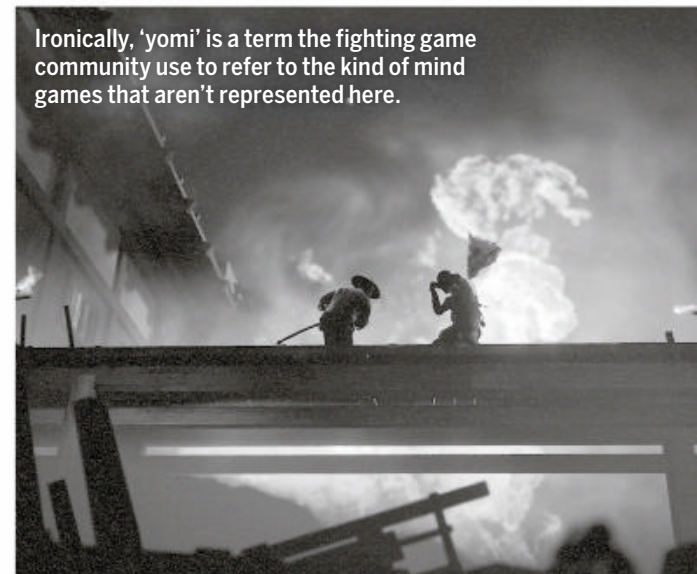
Kerry Brunskill



PLAYED IT



Ironically, 'yomi' is a term the fighting game community use to refer to the kind of mind games that aren't represented here.



IDOLISES THE FICTIONALISED CONCEPT OF SAMURAI AS BRAVE AND NOBLE DEFENDERS



ABOVE: Is there more to being a samurai than cool swords and distinctive hats? You won't find out here.

LEFT: The camera's more interested in capturing the visuals than aiding you in play.

PREVIEW

Deliver Us Mars

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

TBC

DEVELOPER

KeokeN Interactive

PUBLISHER

Frontier Foundry

LINK

deliverusmars.com

DELIVER US MARS

FIRST
LOOK

Climb the mountains of
another world

There's just something about Mars, isn't there? For a dusty, featureless wasteland, it's oddly evocative, in a way that sci-fi stories just can't resist. So of course it makes perfect sense that the follow up to *Deliver Us the Moon* is seeing red.

Deliver Us Mars offers an atmospheric journey across the planet, as you struggle to recover lost colony ships in a galaxy where humanity lingers on the brink of extinction. The story feels grounded in hard science fiction and realistic ideas of space travel and exploration – though we're not exactly sure what plausible technology it is that allows you to have a little floating round drone as a sidekick.

Given Mars' rocky surface, it makes sense that the game introduces a climbing system, allowing you to use your trusty pick to clamber around on its dusty red mountains. You'll also overcome other "mental and physical challenges" – if the first game is anything to go by, expect lots of messing about with cool near-future gadgets.

A teaser, showing the main character stranded in a spaceship crash and looking out on the dusty expanse of the planet, sets the tone but doesn't reveal much – expect more info to be released in the coming months.

Robin Valentine

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PREVIEW

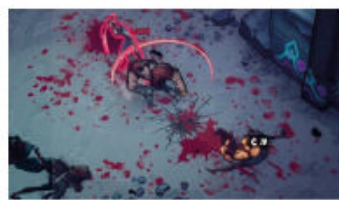
Superfuse



ABOVE: Even superheroes need to do their chores.

RIGHT: Fight bosses, and maybe end up fighting your bosses.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Stitch Heads Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
superfusegame.com

SUPERFUSE

Become the hero of your nightmares

OK, so we're all a little tired of superheroes at this point. With the ever growing Marvel Cinematic Universe and however many Batmans we have now, you probably think you've had enough of both great powers and great responsibilities. But I promise you you've never seen superheroes quite like the ones in *Superfuse*.

This action-RPG takes place far in the future, a time when the people of Earth have gone on to populate other areas of space led by gods. And by gods, we're talking billionaires evolved by science to the point they're undying, domineering dictators of the universe. You play one of their lackeys.

Not only have these gods altered themselves, but they've also taken on an army of supercharged mercenaries (that's you) called Enforcers. Which doesn't exactly make it sound like you're playing the good guys, right? Well it seems like that's a key part of the story – you're going to have to explore the idea of what being a hero really means in the face of metaphorically parasitic employers, but also literally parasitic alien beings called the Corruption. You'll have to face this threat while acknowledging your part in the dystopian future of the human race – and, seemingly, uncovering a dark conspiracy on your own side.

All that's very intriguing, but where *Superfuse* really drew me in was when I saw its combat system. The game aims to allow you to fully craft a superhero's

abilities and powers, right down to the finest details.

I got to go hands-on with one of the base characters, the Berserker. Each hero will have their own set of talents and abilities, and this muscle-bound monster can be exactly what you'd expect – namely a tank with a huge axe who makes a mess of the enemy. But equally, with the right options, those broad shoulders can be just for show. You can make your Berserker into more a squishy wizard type, for example, just by investing in the right paths.

HERO WORSHIP

Each talent can be individually customised to your liking. You want your axe slam move to launch you forward? You got it. How about upon use the area of effect splits more and more? Yeah you can do that too. Or maybe it's splitting too much and you want to narrow its focus and make its range larger? Yep, fully up to you mate. Even just a basic lightning blast lets you choose exactly what it does upon casting, upon hitting an enemy, upon killing an enemy, all the way up to what it does as an after-effect. Every time I thought I'd seen it all, a new layer of customisation was revealed. The vision of *Superfuse* really is that detailed, and it's up to you to construct your superhero exactly the way you like them.

The best part? You can do all this on the fly and respect at will. If you're not quite happy with the way you've crafted your melee attack, or you think an explosion of lightning is more suited to the beginning of your cast, rather than the end, you can change that at any moment away from combat. Reassess on the go. Full combat customisation freedom. Neat.

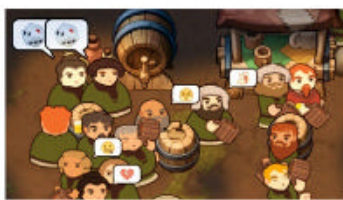
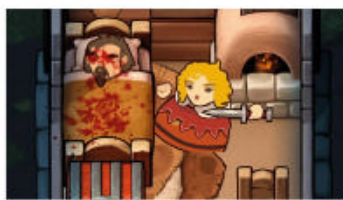
This is looking like far more than just another injection of superhero content, then. Not only does the wildly extensive customisation play into anyone's comic book fantasies, it opens the floor to a ridiculous variety of builds and playstyles for min-maxers and number nerds – just the thing for keeping an action-RPG as fresh as possible for as long as possible. If only there was a talent we could equip that would force the developer to give us a release date...

Imogen Mellor

PLAYED IT

AIMS TO ALLOW YOU TO CRAFT A SUPERHERO'S POWERS DOWN TO THE FINEST DETAILS

Brute force in human form.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn

DEVELOPER
Long Jaunt

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
norlandgame.com

NORLAND

Keeping medieval management all in the family

This clever sim lets you manage a medieval kingdom through a royal family of avatars. What has me intrigued is all the stories it can create – the medieval setting is a messy sandbox for catty rivalries between clans and nobles, and the more I spoke with developer Dmitry Glaznev, the more excited at the possibilities I became.

You start with a misfit noble family. Getting to customise their skills, personality traits, and appearance is a given, with other character attributes “still in development”, Glaznev tells me. As your family grows, they’ll pass on the “talents and curses” of their lineage, assuming they live long enough.

Your family represents the most direct control you’ll have in *Norland*. In order to get things done, you’ll have to give orders to each member, sending them off to different parts of your realm. They can manage building projects, train troops, write books, and more. Each lower tier of character becomes more abstracted, with warriors controlled as part of an army or set to guard things, and peasants only influenced by wages.

When it comes to your kingdom, *Norland* focuses more on the macro, with prefab buildings. “Since we have a city-builder at our core, we can’t customise buildings,” Glaznev explained. “You have to recognise them quickly. Therefore, buildings are only supplemented with details as they are upgraded.” Expect the usual city builder

NEW
INFO

routines – production, controlling prices, and trying to keep your peasants’ oppression and happiness balanced.

Your peasants’ morale and protection are critical, but just like you they’re one fish in the bigger pond. On the larger world map, other kingdoms are a constant threat – and opportunity – for you to deal with. It looks like you’ll be spending your time on the larger map making decisions on different events, from plagues to disasters, as well as discovering chances to interact with other leaders – whether making war, diplomacy, or quietly assassinating them.

IN THE KNOW

My favourite part of colony sims is the struggle for progress – straining for a certain resource or tech only to have a fire, boar attack, or illness set you back. When I asked Glaznev about technology, I learned *Norland* will be less linear, “We decided not to make a hierarchical tree of technology, but rather a network system more characteristic of the early middle ages. Knowledge is contained in books or in the minds of characters. When a character accumulates certain skills, he can write a new book, which can be sold or rewritten. Also, one can buy and rewrite books written by other authors, gaining new knowledge. Knowledge can also be lost.”

The idea of *Norland* simulating the possibility of things like a dark age, or the theft of important schematics, is an exciting one – plenty of potential for shennanigans and lamentable screw-ups.

At the centre of every memorable empire or dynasty I’ve had in a game is a collection of funny and tragic stories, ones that unfolded from the misadventures of my characters. Glaznev is already finding those stories in the current build of *Norland*. He tells me about a playthrough where a kind wife of the abusive king snapped and murdered him in the night, before running off to the temple to pray – and then having to bring her back to her senses to not alienate the rest of the family who liked her.

The heart of *Norland* is sure to be how these narratives unfold – if it can live up to Glaznev’s ambitions, it’ll be a wonderful place to write new histories.

Philip Palmer



OTHER KINGDOMS ARE A
THREAT – AND OPPORTUNITY
– FOR YOU TO DEAL WITH

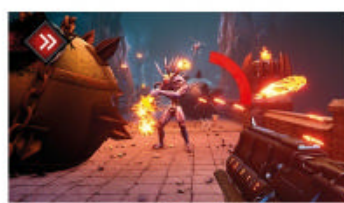
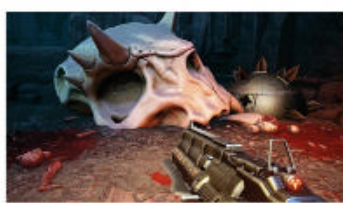
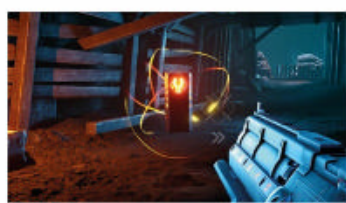


ABOVE: The easiest way to tell if you're the good guys is to check how many burning skulls are in your temples.

LEFT: City defences may be a good way to protect key buildings – or their precious inhabitants – during enemy raids.

FAR LEFT: Setting an example for your citizens will be very 'hands on' from time to time.

Scathe



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Damage State

PUBLISHER
Kwalee Ltd

LINK
playscathe.com

SCATHE

Mixing the FPS with the bullet hell shooter in familiar territory

Games that are a bit like *Doom* but not actually *Doom* have a chequered history. While few remember *Blood* or *Painkiller*, there are those games like *Serious Sam* that refuse to die. 'Demons with guns that run at you' is a fertile furrow to grow games in, turns out.

Enter three-person Scottish developer Damage State, which has hitched its plough to id's tractor and is trying to out-fertilise *Doom*. In *Scathe* you play as, well, *Scathe*, an enforcer of the legions of Hell forged from the earth by the Divine Creator. That's quite a thing to have embossed on your business card. For, y'know, reasons, *Scathe* is required to prove its worth by running through a maze and shooting everything that gets in its way. There's lava, a biomechanical feel to the bad guys (the influence of the Arch-Vile, Mancubus, Lost Souls, Sonic the Hedgehog, and the flying things from the first Avengers movie are clear) and some skittering spider things. So far, so *Doom*.

Scathe starts out unarmed, but a floating and spinning gun is soon offered up. This turns out to have infinite ammo and a recharging secondary fire mode, which is just as well as there's a lot to shoot at, even though the initial things placed in your path are little more than target practice. *Scathe* departs slightly from the classic *Doom* template at this point, by making the dodge as important to the game as the fire button and the high score ticking away in the corner.

WHILE HEALTH POTIONS EXIST THEY DON'T GIVE YOU A MASSIVE TOP UP

In describing the game as a bullet-hell FPS, Damage State reveals much about its creation. Enemies are many, and go down easy for the most part as long as you can bring fire to bear, but their constant shooting – not to mention the bouncy spiky cubes that are presumably a favourite toy of Cerberus – means actually getting anywhere without taking damage means a lot of running and dodging, a series of demonic drive-bys rather than sustained heavy gunnery.

WHAT THE HELL

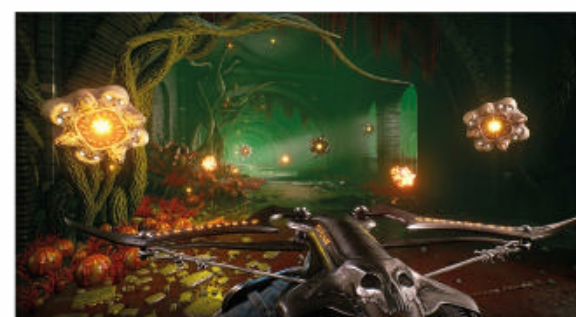
There's repetition as well. *Scathe* isn't particularly robust, and while health potions exist they don't give you a massive top up. Expect to see the early cutscene in which you pick up and brandish your gun many times while you get the hang of the game, especially while that part of your brain that wants to play it like *Doom* insists on getting the upper hand.

Dash through attacks and keep moving, however, in the mould of *Doom Eternal* rather than the *Doom* of 1994, and you'll find yourself breaking through waves of attacks, picking up some rather serious weaponry, and collecting the shards and runes that presumably feed into a power-up system.

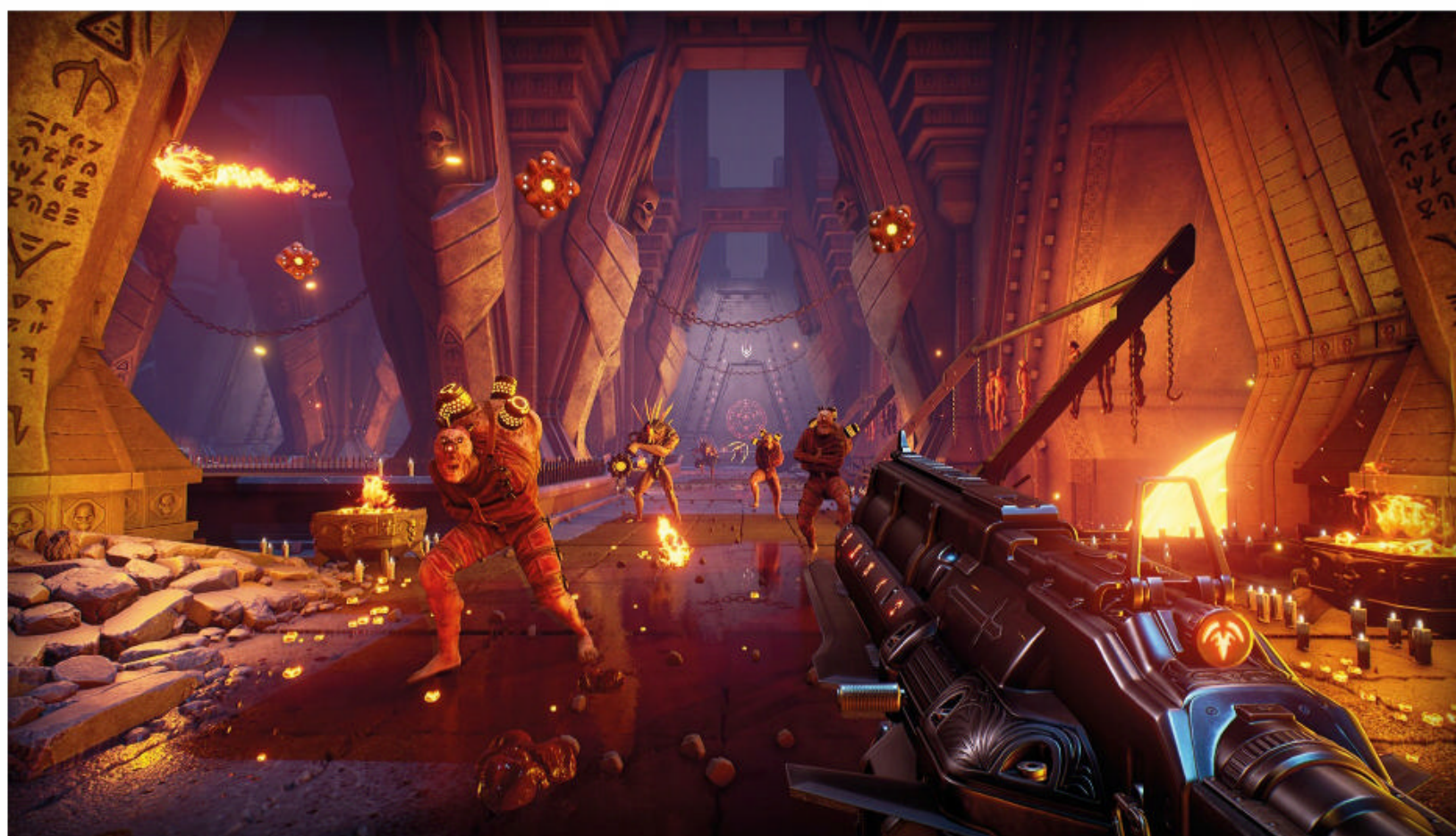
Enemies in this early demo are focused purely on *Scathe* without noticeable infighting, and fit the *Doom* template of one-eyed things that run at you and explode, plus some rather *Quake*-like helicopter soldiers. A *Metro*-like mechanic in which you must wipe the blood off whatever passes for your hellish face or visor acts as a distraction from what's going on around you, the opaque blood making it much harder to see until you do.

While *Scathe* might feel familiar to those who have made innumerable runs through Hell to kill John Romero's head on a stick, there's enough in this demo to show clearly where the game diverges from the template. Corridors and arenas full of aggressive horned things to shoot at may not be the most original idea, but if there's one thing videogame history teaches us, it's that games like this can be a lot of mindless fun, and if that's where Damage State is aiming, it's got a good chance of scoring a headshot.

Ian Evenden



Is there a manicurist in the building?



ABOVE: Some demons are bigger than others, and some demons' mothers...

LEFT: The more we learn about Hell, the less we like it.

Highrise City



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Fourexo Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Deck 13

LINK
highrisecitygame.com

HIGHRISE CITY

Bringing excitement to Dullsville

It's been a long time since *Cities XXL* or *Cities: Skylines*, and even longer since *SimCity 4*. The wave of city building games from indie developers continues, however, with *Frostpunk* and its upcoming sequel as the spearhead. *Highrise City* doesn't promise the ability to send children to the coal mines, but intrigues nonetheless.

It promises a 'modern take on the genre', which I hope involves ray tracing and postmodernism rather than NFTs and lockdowns. *Highrise* comes from Fourexo Entertainment, a German team looking to merge city building and tycoon games into an economy-focused title rather than just a competition about building the biggest skyscrapers.

Running on the Unreal engine, there's a lot to like about *Highrise's* presentation. We're promised voxel-based terrain, enormous maps of almost 200 square kilometres, and custom path-finding algorithms that make traffic a little less dumb in the face of multiple routes to its goal. And while there is a ray tracing button on the options screen, it's greyed out in the preview code. Also notable by their absence are many places to build a city. Only Rio and Cape Town are available as starting locations, but naturally they're empty when you begin.

If anything, the game is reminiscent of *Total War* in the way you soar above the battlefield... er, city streets, and spin the camera around. There's a nice effect when you dip the camera underwater, and a

hugely in-depth tutorial that takes you through everything you need to know. It's a lot to take in, but again like *Total War* once you've mastered the tools, they become second nature.

Building your city is a case of zoning, setting tax rates, connecting up water and power supplies, and even making sure someone is there to take the garbage away. Resources such as wood have to be collected and a port built to initiate trade. The shadows of planes cross the ground, and enormous container ships come in close to the coastline looking for somewhere to put in. There's an overall feeling of a whole industrialised world out there, and you're stuck in the middle ages.

CITY LIMITS

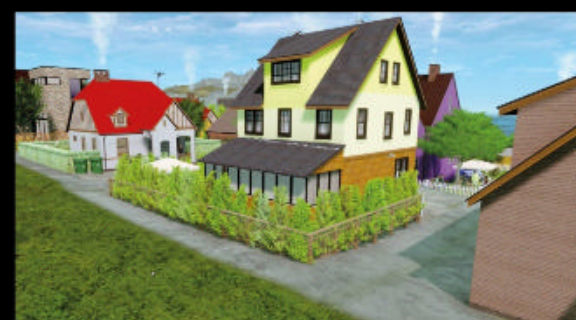
There's only one way out, and that's to build. You start with a road, adding residential and office zones, power and water. Citizens arrive out of nowhere, and soon they're bustling up and down in trucks and cars that must have been airlifted in or driven cross-country, as the town has no connections to the outside world. In a neat twist, you can put a vehicle down and drive around your city, safely passing through any roadside adverts and pedestrians you happen to run into.

It's perhaps churlish to mention it as the game's in Early Access, but it's not the best-looking Unreal game I've seen. This, evidenced by that ray tracing button on the options screen, is clearly in hand, but running in 4K at Epic quality, I was rewarded with waving grass, Vs of flying geese, painterly clouds, and a lot of identical trees and pedestrians. There's something boxy about the buildings too – for a game with a photo mode, the way road names show through buildings isn't going to show it off in the right light.

Highrise City is a complex game that will repay repeated play and learning of its systems, and doesn't suffer those who skip the tutorial gladly. Its economic approach to the city builder is refreshing, however, bringing a bigger slice of resource management than we've seen in other games. Your eventual megalopolis should be a soaring triumph of shining steel and glass, and as it stands, the game is on the right road to achieving that.

Ian Evenden

RESOURCES SUCH AS WOOD HAVE TO BE COLLECTED AND A PORT BUILT TO INITIATE TRADE





ABOVE: If you build a road, they will come and drive on it.

FAR LEFT: Levelling up your city unlocks new buildings, and garbage collection.

LEFT: What this needs is car theft, and guns.

COVER FEATURE

Nightingale



LORDS OF THE REALM

History, fantasy, and fashion
meet in co-op survival game

NIGHTINGALE

By Chris Livingston

Nightingale



In the late 1800s, towering metal pylons loom over the Victorian city of *Nightingale*, crackling with magical energy. In this alt-history timeline, ancient mystical creatures from another realm known as the Fae revealed themselves to the world in the 1500s, changing the course of human history by introducing us to magic. *Nightingale* essentially became the new centre of the world as people flocked to the city to learn the ways of arcane sorcery and put it to use in science and industry. Magic portals were opened and human explorers, known as Realmwalkers, began stepping through them to explore unknown worlds, returning with new resources, discoveries, and a whole lot of treasure.

But in 1889 this bold new age of magic came crashing to an end. A mysterious cataclysm called the Pale invaded our world. To flee its destruction, humans across the planet attempted to use their portals to reach the relative safety of *Nightingale*, but the portal network had already been destroyed. Instead of arriving at *Nightingale*, these humans stepped out of their portals and found themselves trapped in the Fae realms with no way to return home, armed with nothing but their wits and resourcefulness in a strange and hostile world.

That's a lot to absorb before you've fashioned your first axe and chopped down your first tree in *Nightingale*, the upcoming shared-world survival game from Inflexion Games. But there's another, less complicated way to explain it.

"It's all about top hats," says Aaryn Flynn, ex-BioWare general manager and CEO of Inflexion Games tells me. "There's a lot of top hats."

FASHION AND FUNCTION

The Victorian style is certainly potent in the concept art, screenshots, and footage I'm shown when I meet with members of the development team via Zoom. Yes, you'll kill an angry boar and strip its hide with a knife like in any other number of survival games, but you won't wind up dressed in crude leather rags and a loincloth in *Nightingale*. Our Realmwalkers may be stranded in a savage world of monsters and magic, but that's no excuse for not dressing up all fancy. You'll take your collected resources to an old-fashioned sewing machine and create dapper waistcoats, bowler hats and bustle gowns. Classy duds. The basics of survival are familiar: trees need to be chopped for wood and berries picked for sustenance. But this is a particularly stylish gaslamp fantasy.

While a lot of details are still under wraps, and many features still in the works or not fully fleshed out yet, we know *Nightingale* plans to support up to ten co-op players in a single game when it launches into Early Access near the end of 2022. No PvP is planned for *Nightingale* – this is a strictly co-operative affair more along the lines of *Valheim*, where you work together with friends, than something like *Rust* where you spend your time murdering strangers. You can also play solo, though from the looks of the boss monsters I'm shown, which Inflexion calls "apex creatures", bringing along a couple pals for the battle sure seems like a good idea.

BOSS LEVEL

One apex, called Ishmael, is a massive leathery swamp beast capable of turning ranged combat into a melee affair by crossing the distance with a single leap. The Fae has a race of giants as well, towering humanoids with great shaggy beards and feet big enough to flatten a building. I'm shown the concept art of a third apex creature, a massive bronze being with four arms and a clockwork head that looks like it could serve as a god to a race of copper robots, which I'm told is called an automaton.

"We have this concept within the Fae mythology," says Neil Thompson, art and audio director for *Nightingale*. "They're not strictly machines, because the Fae would never do something as crass as [build] something that requires gears and fuel, but they have these magically infused, we call them automatons, which were built millennia ago but still exist. And the bloodlines that build them have long since passed into obscurity but the automatons themselves still exist within some of the realms. So, you know, what is their motivation? And what are their particular abilities? Well, that's something for players to find out."

But not all encounters with the creatures of these realms need to end in violence. There may be peaceful solutions that can be explored instead of simply solving every problem you come across by unleashing a Victorian shotgun blast. The *Nightingale* trailer revealed at the Game Awards in December 2021 shows a massive giant angrily stomping on stone structures while a player backpedals and fires a bolt-action rifle at it. But another clip

VICTORIAN VS VIKING

How does *Nightingale* stack up against 2021's most popular survival game?

	VALHEIM	NIGHTINGALE
PORTALS		
CO-OP PLAY		
SWAMP MONSTERS		
BOWLER HATS		



Someone picked
the wrong tree to
chop down.

**NO PVP IS PLANNED FOR
NIGHTINGALE – THIS IS A STRICTLY
CO-OPERATIVE AFFAIR**



One of *Nightingale*'s apex creatures, swamp boss Ishmael.



“AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, WE WANT TO OFFER MULTIPLE WAYS TO SOLVE ONE OF THESE ENCOUNTERS”

shows the giant bending down to reach out in a friendly manner to the players. That reflects the more diplomatic solutions that will be available in the final game.

“As much as possible, we want to offer multiple ways to solve one of these encounters, right?” says Flynn. “So in the quest you might choose to take, the quest might say, ‘Bring me back [something from] the giant,’ and perhaps you could trade with the giant for it, or perhaps you would try to kill the giant and take it. Again, we want both options available for players so that they can choose how they want to go do it. And there might even be long term consequences to each of those choices in terms of how an NPC might ultimately act with you.”

HISTORY CHANNELS

Beyond the fantastical, there are some NPCs in *Nightingale* you might recognise from our own history books. Nellie Bly, for example, was an American journalist in the late 1800s who, among other accomplishments

travelled around the world in 72 days by steamship and railroad, setting a world record. (During which she met Jules Verne, who wrote *Around the World in 80 Days*, the fictional record Bly set out to beat.) A fictionalised version of Bly is woven into the lore of *Nightingale*. “Nellie Bly was an interesting character in that period, [a

very] independent and resourceful woman at the time,” says Thompson. “And [meeting her] gives players an opportunity to just delve deeper into the world and into the lore. And obviously, she will give you information and tasks that will help you help you further your quest to find *Nightingale*.”



STAR POWER

A wishlist of other 19th century celebs we'd like to run into



ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL

The guy who invented the telephone would be interested in talking through portals.



LOUIS PASTEUR

The other realms are probably crawling with strange diseases. Who better to develop vaccines for Realmwalkers?



ISABELLA BIRD

The famed British explorer, writer, and photographer wouldn't hesitate to visit and document strange new realms.



CHARLES DARWIN

The father of evolution is going to have a lot to study, especially when trees start walking about.



That's just one of several historical figures inhabiting the Victorian world of *Nightingale*. Chemist and physicist Marie Curie is in the game, too, a scientist naturally drawn to study magic in the world of *Nightingale*. And according to Thompson, there are "plenty of others".

"We lean into that. We like it a lot, bringing in these potentially recognisable characters into the lore," adds Flynn. "Things like that, famous 19th century personalities who players are going to get a chance to interact with."

Some NPCs will serve even more of a purpose than historical flavour and quest-giving. While this feature won't be available immediately upon *Nightingale*'s release in Early Access, but is planned for later on in the game's development, eventually some NPCs will be recruitable and can help you build and service the structures you build.

"You don't have to necessarily do all the work yourself," says Flynn. "You can come across these other NPCs who are lost in the same

situation you are, perhaps some of them have been in the realms for a long time. And you can connect with them, then you can bring them to your estate and you can have them do things for you. They also can join you on adventures so you can bring them along to help you hunt, help you defend yourself, etc."

Just try not to think of these NPCs as simple hired hands or soulless robots who will complete a list of chores. They sound more like companions in an RPG, which isn't surprising considering Inflexion was founded by Flynn, the former general manager at BioWare, and *Nightingale*'s 100-member team includes other BioWare veterans.

"I think an important thing to talk about, that we as a studio think of a lot is, to bring that sense of kind of balance to the world, the NPCs aren't just people you hire," says Leah Summers, director of production. "What are their desires? How do you need to take care of their needs or satisfy them so that we're not just kind of hiring out a bunch of people

to do mundane chores. There's really choices and interesting consequences to what you're doing with the NPCs."

PORTAL WARS

The ultimate goal for players is to find a way to open a portal back to the city of Nightingale, but many other portals will need to be opened first (*Nightingale* itself, as a location, won't be present in the game when it enters Early Access). Within the Fae realm, players will be able to open magic doorways to new areas and discover zones that harbour new resources. I'm shown a desert-like biome at the edge of an ocean, where, intriguingly, a wrecked ship lies off the coast, framed by the setting sun. ("The real question is, is it a human ship?" says Thompson. "Or is it a Fae ship?") Players can also expect to open gateways to tropical jungles, murky swamps, dense forests, and whatever bizarre dimension that giant bronze clockwork god resides in.

Naturally, base-building is a big part of the experience, but to match

Fearsome, but I don't think he's mastered the wheel yet.



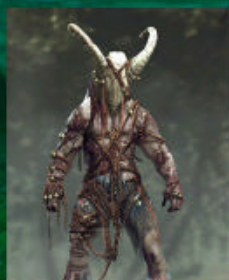
“AS YOU DO NEGATIVE THINGS, AS
NEGATIVE THINGS HAPPEN TO YOU,
HOPE GOES DOWN”

» your fancy clothing they're called estates, not bases. You don't have to clear out a spot of land and build your estate from scratch, either. Long before the cataclysm that stranded you here, other explorers were visiting this realm. You might come across an earlier Realmwalker's camp and be able to sleep in their bedroll. There are existing structures out in the world, places others have built that you can co-opt and build your estate alongside. You may even open a portal to a different realm, discover a new biome and decide that despite its harsh nature you want to build a



BOUND FOR CONFLICT

Meet just one of the dangerous enemies you'll encounter in the Fae realms



1 RIPPED AND TORN

These humanoid enemies are known as Bound Bruisers, and it's pretty easy to see why.



2 HATS RIGHT

The Bruiser's face is covered with different headgear, including wagon wheels, skulls, and copper tanks.

3 WEAPONS FREE

Some wield mighty bludgeons, others make do with just their fists. Either way: don't get hit.

second base there to more easily exploit its resources.

HOPE FLOATS

While you'll contend with some familiar survival systems in *Nightingale*, like keeping your health up and protecting yourself from heat or cold in different environments, there's another meter players will contend with built on an entirely different notion than physical survival. It's hope.

"All Realmwalkers carry an amount of hope with them," says Flynn. "And it's a bar on your UI. As you do positive things, hope goes up. As you do negative things, as negative things happen to you, hope goes down. And so you have to manage that hope through the dangerous parts of the realms as you go adventuring. And you'll want to look to things to increase your overall pool of hope over time, you get stronger, you get more resilient and there'll be things that come at you that will shatter your hope and make you feel lost and alone forever."

Another survival game, *Frostpunk*, also had a hope meter (along with a discontent meter) that reflected the mood of your citizens in the post-apocalyptic city builder, but here in *Nightingale* it's focused on the individual player. I can see the hope meter in one of the clips I'm shown, as a player visits the realm in the early game, chopping trees and gathering resources. The bar is barely filled. In another clip it's entirely empty: the character is hopeless and has to find shelter to recharge.

"So the survival bars are traditionally grounded in the physical: health, hunger, etc.," says Flynn. "And now we want to bring in a one that speaks more to a psychological element."

"A fun question developers ask themselves is, what's the power of hope? And so what if you did things that just absolutely swelled your hope beyond belief? What could you do in that mindset? What could you achieve?"

What indeed? ■

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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Pack it in

Inside you are two wolves, and they are always fighting. One despairs that games are too big these days. It spends all its spare time on Twitter moaning that it doesn't have enough time to finish them. The other wishes that games were even bigger, grander, unreasonably ambitious. It loves when it can see a mountain and go there, but it howls in rage when it can't go past the mountain because of an invisible wall. In the same month that I finally gave up on the hope of ever finishing *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, declaring it "stupidly enormous" and "frankly an absurd imposition on my time", I find myself playing the new *Lego Star Wars*, a game that already adapts 45 years' worth of cinematic storytelling, and thinking "why didn't they cover the spin-offs and TV shows too?". The wolves fight on, as I console myself by searching for my 1,000th Kyber Brick.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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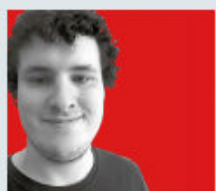
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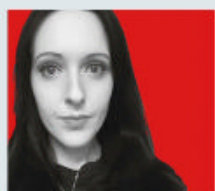
This month's critical hitting reviewers...



JODY MCGREGOR
Specialist in
Fungal flatulence
Currently playing
Tiny Tina's Wonderlands
This month
Do mushrooms have butts? Jody has found the answer.



JEREMY PEEL
Specialist in
Stealing our hearts
Currently playing
Abermore
This month
Made his fortune in a city where houses are broken and even puddles ain't right.



ANNE-MARIE COYLE
Specialist in
Links
Currently playing
Tunic
This month
Played as a fox who fights bosses instead of eating out of bins.



TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Forcing the issue
Currently playing
Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga
This month
Crafted several new and exciting bad Star Wars puns.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Charr grilling
Currently playing
Guild Wars 2: End of Dragons
This month
Once again tried and failed to get us all to play his fave MMO.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Ribbits at rabbits
Currently playing
Frog Familiar
This month
Made friends with the critters of the forest, from Mr Fox to Lady Tied Up Dog Poo Bag.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Sideburns
Currently playing
Bulletstorm
This month
Revisited the game that originated the popular phrase, "I'll kill your dick."

GUNDALF

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS is still very much a Borderlands banter-shooter

By Jody Macgregor

Tiny Tina's *Assault on Dragon Keep*, the *Borderlands 2* expansion that doubled as a loving parody of *Dungeons & Dragons*, came out in 2013. That was a year before fifth edition revitalised interest in *Dungeons & Dragons*, two years before *Critical Role* premiered. At the time, jokes about *Dungeons & Dragons* seemed pretty niche.

It was a surprising move for a shooter expansion, but it sure did pay off, hitting an untapped vein and quickly becoming everyone's favourite DLC. In 2022, though? D&D is popular as it's ever been, approaching cultural oversaturation, and

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands returns to a well that's close to running dry.

While it looks like a bouncy fantasy-comedy, it plays like *Borderlands*. Specifically,

Borderlands 3. Some of the guns shoot crossbow bolts and the grenades have been replaced by spells, but moment-to-moment it's typical *Borderlands* – you shoot hordes of bad guys who repeat pithy one-liners, then compare loot to see if the new guns and shields are better than the old ones, and then do it again.

Being a review of a *Borderlands* game, I'm obliged by law to tell you about the best guns its randomised

loot pool spat out for me. A sniper rifle that fired sawblades, each of which did higher damage the more sawblades were already in a target, was a highlight. The Tediore guns that don't need to be reloaded –

instead transforming into throwable explosives then teleporting a fully-loaded replacement into your empty hands – have returned, and I got one that didn't become an explosive but instead became a

laser pixie that harassed bad guys. Another summoned hydra heads that vomited poison. Which was nice.

One significant change is character creation. Rather than each class being tied to an individual character, you play as a nameless newbie, building a face and colour scheme and choosing a voice (you can even alter the pitch, an option I haven't seen since *Saints Row IV*), and then choose any class you want.

I spent most of my time as a Spore Warden, a kind of fungal ranger

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A spin-off that's bigger than an expansion, smaller than a standalone *Borderlands* game

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Gearbox Software

PUBLISHER
2K Games

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
2kgam.es/3LV0G52

GET A (MUSH)ROOM

I spent most of my time as a Spore Warden, a kind of fungal ranger with a walking mushroom pet I upgraded so he farted poison. A few of the classes get NPC allies; my co-op buddy played a Graveborn who had a floating skull friend. My mushroom companion really came into his own when I played solo, even able to revive me when I dropped in the absence of a co-op partner. While co-op is a chaotic good time like always, having an NPC ally makes playing alone an even more viable option, and it was already a totally satisfying way to play.

Of course, I had to revive the friendly fungus sometimes too, which got me into trouble more than once. Though actually the worst thing about him was how distracting he was. He'd hop around in the background when quest givers were talking, his floating title 'MUSHROOM COMPANION' appearing in big white letters visible over the NPC's face. His detailed buttocks were distracting too.

The Spellshot's class ability, being able to slot in two spells rather than one, seemed underwhelming at first, but when you get spells that drop ice meteors on skeletons – who take bonus frost damage because they don't have skin to keep them warm, just go with it – it seems worth it. But the Stabbomancer being able to throw a spinning melee weapon that becomes a blade tornado you can reposition around the battlefield? That's my current fave.

Melee weapons are a new addition, but not a game-changing one. Your regular melee attack, still mapped to V for some reason, becomes a whack with whatever sword, axe, or stick you've picked up. They've got randomised stats, though nothing as wild as the guns. Same with armour, which mostly boosts your class abilities like relics do in the mainline *Borderlands* games, rather than providing any actual protection. >>

YOUR DM

Anatomy of a Dungeon Master



1 CAFFEINE PROCESSING
Wake-up juice keeps a DM alert to shenanigans.

2 THE POWER OF IMAGINATION
Also known as: stealing bits from movies.

3 SNACK PROCESSING
80% sugary treats by weight.

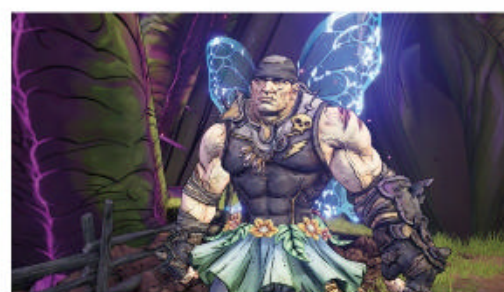
4 DICE HAND
For fudging rolls as the story demands.

5 ENCOUNTER DESIGN
"I'll just put in one puzzle door, they'll love it."





Why are mushrooms so bootylicious?



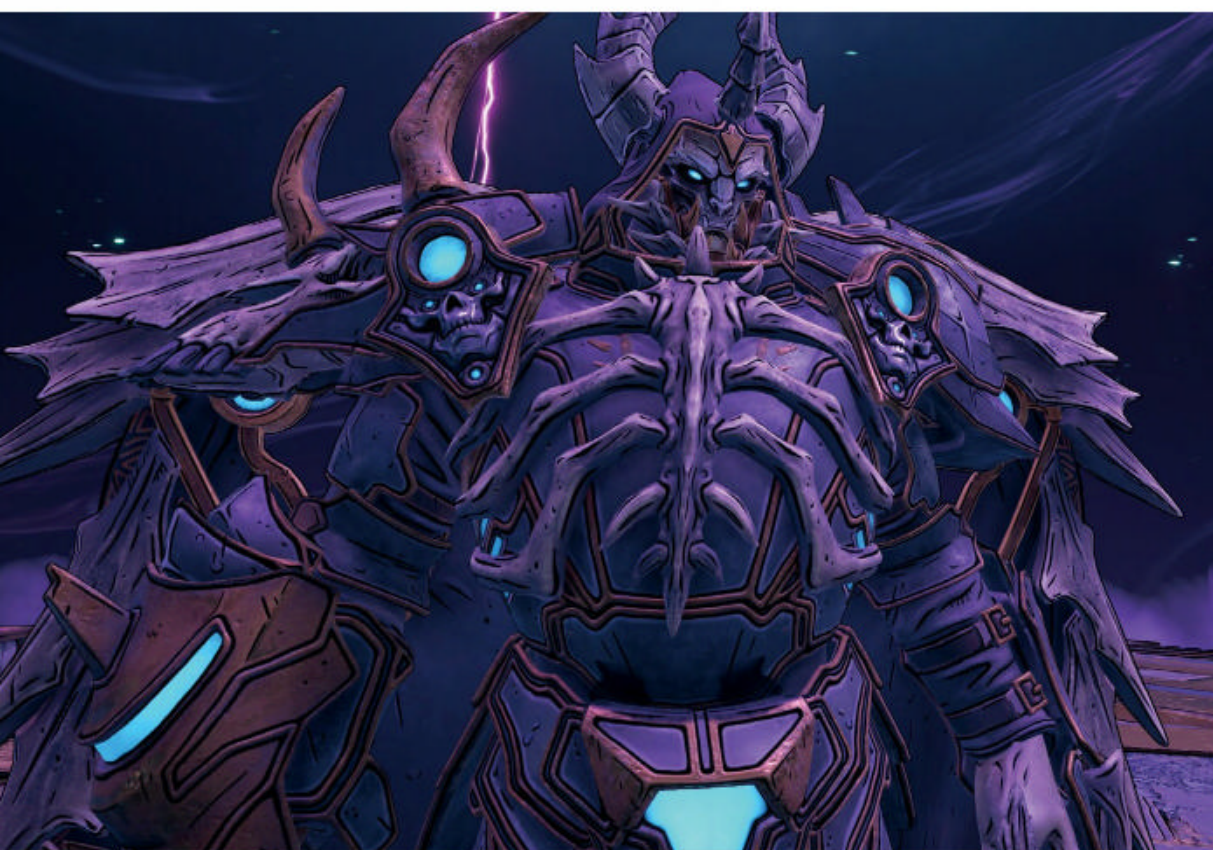
ABOVE: This whole zone is built on a giant beanstalk.

FAR LEFT: Yep, that's loot.

LEFT: Brick returns as the Fairy Punchfather.



Photo mode makes shots like this possible.



Will Arnett's been working out.



RIGHT: Legolas upgraded his bow.

FAR RIGHT: Gearbox has Andy Samberg money these days.



The bridge made from an eraser is a nice touch.

SKILL YOUR DARLINGS

While each class in the previous games had multiple skill trees, here they've only got one (though they do unlock a second active special, like the stabbomancer getting an option to turn invisible instead of throw a knife tornado). Instead, build diversity comes from multiclassing once you've hit higher levels, picking a second class to bolt on. My Spore Warden multiclassed into Spellshot, becoming a sporcerer. I mostly just stuck to reliable fungus powers, though. After playing a certain amount of *Pathfinder*, the thought of having to galaxy-brain my way into overpowered class interactions ever again makes me feel ill.

On my RTX 3080, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* ran at over 100fps most of the time, though cutscenes are locked to 30fps. The only time it stuttered was when I'd get error messages saying my connection to the Shift network, which you need to sign up to for the multiplayer and sweet loot scored via redeeming Shift keys, was down. Another message saying the connection was back up would immediately follow, accompanied by a lurch. Oddly, it never happened in multiplayer, but was a regular occurrence solo.

Like previous *Borderlands* games, you'll want to push the FoV up and the look sensitivity down. Weirdly, the hotspot for the left arrow on every menu slider is slightly off. You can click on the right arrows fine, but have to click sort of near but not actually on the left arrows.

One last change worth noting has to do with the overworld map. Rather than zooming across empty spaces in vehicles, the areas between zones are filled by a tilt-shifted, top-down tabletop world covered in dice, big-headed figurines, and spilled junk food. It's super cute, and full of sidequests as well as random encounters that trigger combat arenas when you're walking through patches of long grass.

That's a *Pokémon* reference of course, but a lot of the trademark *Borderlands* reference-heavy humour in *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* goes for targets that aren't RPGs. There are extended storylines that riff on The Smurfs, Don Quixote and *Monkey Island*, among others. The last one's

especially baffling, since *Monkey Island* was a pretty funny game to begin with and redoing it with Guybrush Threepwood as a skeleton named Bones Three-Wood is substantially less funny.

Every now and then a bit lands with startling precision, though, usually when your advisors – two fellow players voiced by Andy Samberg and Wanda Sykes – riff on roleplaying stereotypes. They'll be familiar to anyone who has played D&D or games like it. He's the one who cares about backstory and wants to solve every problem via seduction;

she's the one who knows all the rules and how to efficiently kill everything.

Sometimes it's painfully accurate to the experience of tabletop RPGs, like when the players fixate on minor NPCs they've decided to distrust for arbitrary reasons while Tina fails to convince them to move on. That made me wince, but I was smiling through the pain. To its credit, and my surprise, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* actually does find some fresh angles to come at a comedy about roleplaying.

It's funnier than *Borderlands 3*, that's for sure. It helps that Will Arnett, as the Dragon Lord, makes an amusing villain. Because of course he does: He's Will Arnett. Smug monologuing is his entire thing, and if he never quite equals Handsome

Sometimes it's painfully accurate to the experience of tabletop RPGs

Jack from *Borderlands 2* that's only because nobody will.

RETURN TO OZ

I went back to the *Borderlands 2* DLC that inspired *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* to see how I felt about it today, and while I missed some of the quality-of-life features added in *Borderlands 3* that made it into *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* – like mantling, not having to hold down E to pick up ammo, being able to fast-travel from anywhere, and only having to do side quests to be appropriately levelled for the main questline occasionally rather than all the bloody time – it was a riot.

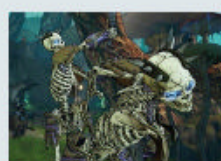
If anything, I like it even more now. That DLC wasn't just a bundle of jokes about the guy who throws his dice too hard or what it's like to fumble a skill check to do something so basic you probably shouldn't have rolled for it in the first place. It was also a fantasy retelling of *Borderlands 2*, the cast reimagined as knights and sorcerers like it was *The Wizard of Oz*. The thing it most effectively parodied was itself.

Meanwhile, *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* is largely disconnected from the *Borderlands* games it slots between, with only a handful of cameos (including Claptrap, sorry to all of you haters). That feels like a missed opportunity, given that *Borderlands 3* was kind of a disaster, and a follow-up that took the piss out of it would have had a lot of material to work with.

It still succeeds more often than it fails, though. That's partly just because of how the *Borderlands* formula has been honed over the years. While other looter-shooters bolt on crafting systems or try to make you care about gear levels and repeatable activities and collecting 15 different kinds of shards (why is it always shards?), *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands* is simply another game of shooting bad guys with ridiculous guns so you can take even more ridiculous guns off their corpses. And sometimes, in-between that, it delivers a gag about what a mess the average game of D&D is that hits me like a knife in the heart. ■

MONSTER MANUAL

Meet your new targets



SKELETONS
We're all skeletons on the inside. Weak to cold, because they have no meat.



SKELETON ARCHERS
Give a skeleton a bow, and they think they're hot shit.



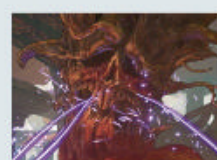
NOT SMURFS
I think they're called Yurfs or something. About as annoying as the real deal.



GOBLINS
Some of them aren't evil. I still hate their guts.



WYVERNS
I just learned how to pronounce their name. Thanks!



EVIL TREE
Made of evil wood. Perfect for making evil dining tables.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is better than *Borderlands 3*, but doesn't quite reach the heights of *Borderlands 2*.

70

AB NOT-SO FAB

ABERMORE is so much less than it could have been

By Jeremy Peel

In the dead of night, a local busybody comes straight to the door of your flat with gossip. Evidently, there's no Facebook in *Abermore*. "The puddle's back," he says. This pool of liquid sits on the city's thoroughfares, apparently, and looks normal enough at a glance. But when carriages pass through, it doesn't splash. And while reflective, it never shows an image. Residents suspect it's fathoms deep. Oh, and that anything falling in turns to metal.

"Transports itself across the city, coming and going as it pleases," says the busybody. "It's a small patch of wrong." If only there were just one small patch of wrong in *Abermore*. Somewhere below the surface of this game, there's a perfectly charming heist simulator that channels *Thief* and *Skyrim*'s Dark Brotherhood quests. But it's drowning – not just in puddles, but oceans of wrong.

There's nothing wrong with the premise. *Abermore* casts you as a street rat in the Gutter, the lowest level of a vertiginous, medieval industrial metropolis that roughly resembles Edinburgh at a steampunk convention. After your Robin Hood-esque leader is captured and imprisoned, you and your fellow conspirators plot a grand jailbreak, to take place during the Feast of the Lucky Few – an eclipse celebration that doubles as a gross demonstration of wealth inequality. Hopefully you'll be able to nab a few fancy goblets on the way out to make the point.

At the beginning of the game, the feast is a couple of weeks away. And so, each night, you take on a smaller job for a local ne'er-do-well – clearing a stately home of its valuables to get some practice in, fund better equipment, and increase your reputation among potential collaborators. There's a satisfying sense of procedure to this setup – rolling out of your bed at noon, pottering around a petite hub to pick up sidequests, and then sidling into the underground pub where thieves gather in the evenings. And there's a

touch of Atlus-style life simulation involved as you get to know the regulars, win their trust, and ultimately pin them down to help out on the night of the Feast.

It's out on the job that the problems really start to stack up

MORE OR LESS

It's out on the job that the problems really start to stack up. There's a random element to levels, designed to keep them fresh. While you might recognise the layout of

a locker room or lobby here or there, these rooms slot together procedurally. But not effectively.

It's as if every house were a clockwork mansion in need of a watchmaker's attention. Some rooms have invisible walls, blocking movement unexpectedly; others are missing floors, leaving guards and consumables stranded in midair. It's very common to scale a staircase and notice an airy gap between two

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A standalone version of a Thieves Guild quest from an imaginary *Elder Scrolls* game

EXPECT TO PAY
£13

DEVELOPER
Four Circle Interactive

PUBLISHER
Fireshine Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600X Six Core CPU, 16GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3jf3f5N

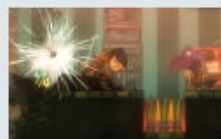
floors, making the positions of guards and butlers visible from above. At worst, gaping holes in the architecture leave buildings open to the elements – a far bigger security issue than me and my lockpicks, and an insulation nightmare to boot.

Sneaking around these splintered spaces is, at least, a fundamentally sound experience. It's a matter of secreting yourself into crawlspaces, under tables, and onto rafters – essentially becoming insulation yourself to avoid being seen by patrolling staff or security cameras. In this way you gradually map the building, casing for gems and rare whiskey and thinking up creative ways to bypass busy corridors. There's a pure, early YouTube pleasure to watching the house's master slip on a banana skin after responding to a service bell rung by yours truly. But it's undermined by AI that's unresponsive and shortsighted – usually a little too forgiving to ever make you feel truly vulnerable during heists.

Over time, I learned to circumvent not just butlers and cameras but *Abermore*'s many flaws, and found myself half-enjoying the game it could have been. But there's simply no way to recommend an experience that might include falling through the floor, or getting stuck on a broken dialogue screen that forces you to replay an entire day of hub conversations and inventory management. I still want to belong to this psychotically daft twilight world, where the fence lets out an admiring "hooo!" as you slide a particularly big gem across the table, like a host on Antiques Roadshow. But the puddles are too many, and they're fathoms deep. ■

YOINKED

The games *Abermore* owes its shtick to



THE SWINDLE
Steampunk? Randomised mansions? A countdown to the big heist? *The Swindle* did it all first, while looking and playing like a stealthy *Spelunky*.



ELDRITCH
This post-*BioShock* indie game was the first to take the immersive sim formula into procedural levels, and it remains a high water mark in that regard.



DISHONORED
Arkane's heists have always been incidental – an accompaniment to plots of revenge and assassination – but its stealth mechanics have left a mark on *Abermore*.

PC GAMER VERDICT

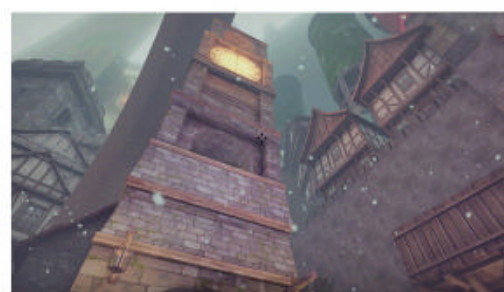
Unfortunately, even *Abermore*'s cult of beetle worshippers would draw the line at this many bugs in the game.

54

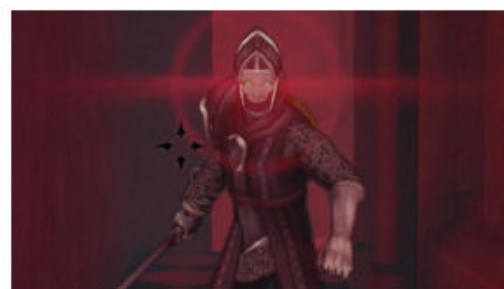
One chef just wants you to steal vegetables from the great and good.



The local beggar asks for 20 gold, but takes 50.



LEFT: Gamepads are mentioned in menus, but don't appear to work.



BELOW LEFT: Figuring out the controls and UI is a game in itself.



FORGET IT, JAKE

Get ready to Google your own clues in **CHINATOWN DETECTIVE AGENCY**

By Alexis Ong

As a lover of sci-fi and a Singaporean, playing *Chinatown Detective Agency* was a rare experience. Not long after entering this near-future version of my home country, it became clear that this game has two layers, aimed at two audiences: one is a point-and-click adventure for folks who grew up with Broderbund's *Carmen Sandiego* series which took them all over the world. The other is a game made especially for Singaporeans.

In 2037, the country has gone through the unthinkable process of deregulation, there's anti-government graffiti on the train, droids are a routine sight, and there's only one human librarian left in the country. You play as Amira Darma, an ex-cop starting out as a private investigator. As she takes on cases and meets clients, Amira gets to travel the world while pulling at the threads of a much bigger mystery.

On the most basic level, it is really cool to explore your home city in pixels. This is something that the global North will never understand, and in this regard *CDA* evokes a very special kind of joy. In Western pop culture, Singapore's claims to fame are relatively recent, namely the last

season of HBO's *Westworld* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, which was a film for Americans. I cannot understate how important it is that *CDA* features Singaporean voice acting, punctuated with snippets of Singlish and Malay.

Overall, General Interactive Co pulls off a surface narrative that works for a general audience unfamiliar with Singaporean in-jokes, as well as more nuanced storytelling that taps into hyperlocal knowledge: Singaporean

megachurch culture, class politics, and our precarious water supply. Most cases take you to different cities – Amira uses a travel program called HORUS to plan flights. Eventually she must choose a main client – I went with Tiger Lily, who runs a

Inconsistencies made for an occasionally frustrating playthrough

“health club” in the red-light district of Geylang. Her case involves a local megachurch and the dysfunctional family behind it.

The puzzles are probably the most divisive part of the game. *CDA*'s main thing is Googling clues yourself – there's a UI button to tab you out into a browser. Even as someone who loves ciphers, a couple of puzzles were overly tiresome. There's a fine line between giving the player a sense of satisfaction while still pushing them to break a little sweat, and here *CDA* wavers. Thankfully the game offers help, so it's really up to how much of a masochist you are.

COLD CASE

Small inconsistencies made for an occasionally frustrating playthrough. The initial part of the game auto-saves after each case. You're supposed to be able to save at your own discretion after you've chosen a main client, but this feature only worked for a short time. HORUS was a wasted opportunity to deepen in-game money management, as every flight costs a flat \$550. Single arbitrary weeks pass between cases – I'm not sure why Amira would wait

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click adventure set in Singapore.

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
General Interactive Co

PUBLISHER
HumbleGames/
WhisperGames

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7 11800H, RTX
3050 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
generalinteractive.co



ABOVE: A bird's eye view of New Delhi at night.



RIGHT: In the future, the law is on vacation.





a week before divulging a critical piece of information to a client.

The writing is a little uneven – the main cast is fairly well-characterised, but a few segments of heavy-handed exposition veer into overly theatrical territory. Most NPCs had one or two canned lines of dialogue that occasionally included mildly jarring non-sequiturs, but is consistent with the idiosyncratic nature of point-and-click adventures as extensions of the developers' personalities.

Even with these flaws, *CDA* is bound to be meaningful to a player like me, and reviewing it for a general audience is rather overwhelming. Because of the lack of my cultural representation in games – Southeast Asian indies are on the rise, though – *CDA* inadvertently takes on an unfair talismanic weight for Singaporeans who deserve better mainstream representations of their identity. Perhaps *CDA* was always going to be a loaded experience for me, though I could leave the generic main plot in favour of its depictions of local problems and culture. As far as point-and-click adventures go, it's a pretty good debut. As a cultural artefact, it's pretty great. ■

TOP: The game taps into ongoing discourse around labour rights.

RIGHT: No, you can't pet the dog in the Great Abode.



SINGAPORE TOUR

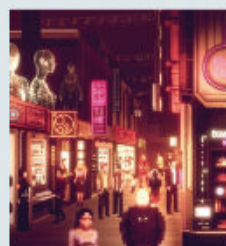
Experience pixelated recreations of the city's landmarks



THE BENJAMIN SHEARES BRIDGE
It's named after Singapore's second president, who died just before it opened.



BEDOK
Bedok once housed one of Singapore's most iconic cinemas, the Princess Theatre (now closed).



BUGIS
This area was once the heart of Singapore sex work and the drag community.



KALLANG
This area is home to Singapore's first civil airport, as well as multiple sports stadiums.



ARMENIAN CHURCH
This historical building was the first in the country to get electricity.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Chinatown Detective Agency is a pretty solid detective adventure with a unique DIY approach to clue-solving.

75

FANTASTIC MR FOX

TUNIC is adorable and gorgeous – but it's got teeth

By Anne-Marie Coyle

Beware of *Tunic's* cute exterior. On the surface, its lovely art style and charming tone bear a striking resemblance to Nintendo's *Zelda* series. But below this cheery surface lies a game intent on testing your resolve. *Tunic's* world is teeming with enemies who are all too willing to knock the stuffing out of you. And you'd best be prepared to die – it has as much in common with *Dark Souls* as it does any of Link's previous outings.

Some games go to painstaking lengths to explain their mechanics, *Tunic* is not one of those. The most important lesson you learn is that the game actually does offer guidance, and in an unusual way – by having you collect the pages of an instruction manual.

If you're stumped about where to go next or need some guidance on how a mechanic works, it's all there in those pages if you look closely enough. A tough foe-filled section saw me hit something of a brick wall early on, and only after flicking through the manual – mainly to give my furry red protagonist a break from all the death – did I stumble across the method to levelling up. The cryptic pages are a clever and inventive way to tease out the game's inner workings, and a delightful throwback to the sadly bygone era of instruction booklets.

After an abrupt opening that sees our fox friend wash up on a beach,

there's little in the way of storytelling. And what scant plot *Tunic* does have is purposefully vague. This world's wider mystery is a nice addition rather than a compelling reason to

play, as just exploring its fascinating surroundings, doing battle with its unsavoury inhabitants, and uncovering its many layers is a riveting story all of its own.

This beautifully constructed isometric world is nothing short of joyous to explore. Both the overworld and the game's many dungeons offer intricately designed environmental puzzles. A lot of the game's locations can be explored straight off the beach, but either difficulty or a lack of equipment usually prevents you from deviating too far from the intended path. For instance, you have access to the Dark Tomb early on, but good luck tackling its skeletons and spiked pits without first finding the lantern.

What scant plot *Tunic* does have is purposefully vague

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An isometric *Zelda*-like with a foxy hero

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Tunic Team

PUBLISHER
Finji

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-11700K,
GeForce RTX 3070,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tunicgame.com

TELL NO TAILS

While the outfit and sword and shield combination effectively turn *Tunic's* fox into a fluffy red Link, many of the game's mechanics are straight out of the *Souls* series. Your gold spills out when you die, and to reclaim your lost wealth, you must make it back to the spot where you fell. The prospect of losing coins adds a level of tension, as you need a considerable amount of them to purchase items and level up.

Enemies don't go easy on you just because you're adorable. They are more than willing to kick your puffy tail right back to the last checkpoint. The highlight is the boss battles. Every encounter is a spectacle, although you won't have much time to appreciate the artistry as you dodge slam attacks and flee from devastating lasers. You'll be yelling things that don't suit *Tunic's* innocent tone when these foes best you for the umpteenth time. They demand patience, but they're also hugely enjoyable – overcoming each feels like an achievement.

Tunic's niggles are, thankfully, as small as its fuzzy hero. All of your attacks can only be mapped to three buttons and, occasionally, levels can take quite long to load. Flying foes often back away just out of reach, making them incredibly irritating until you've got access to ranged magic attacks. All minor annoyances.

While it draws inspiration from some of gaming's greats, *Tunic* has a unique sense of wonder. Its visuals and focus on fun make for a captivating experience. At the same time, the contrasting challenge it presents adds an extra level of satisfaction that make it an adventure you won't soon forget. ■

ONE MAN'S TREASURE

You'll find lots of useful items in *Tunic's* chests



POTION PIECE

Find three of these broken bottles, and you can glue them together for an extra health potion.



KEY

The fox isn't skilled at lockpicking, so you'll have to find keys to get into locked locations.



BOMB

These are useful for taking out lots of enemies at once or whittling down bosses.



TOOTH

This jagged fang may seem like a curious thing to pocket, but it'll allow you to increase your attack.

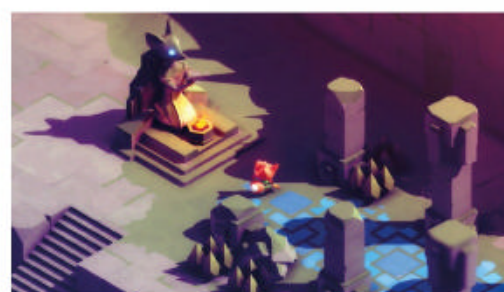
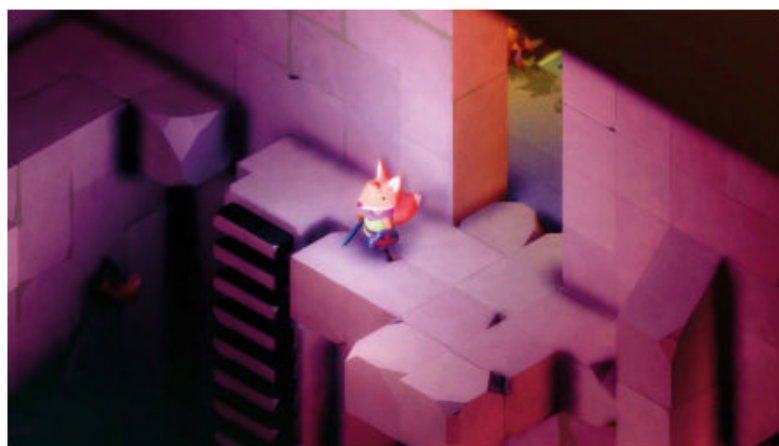


PC GAMER VERDICT

Delightfully difficult combat and meaningful exploration make *Tunic* a retro-inspired modern masterpiece.

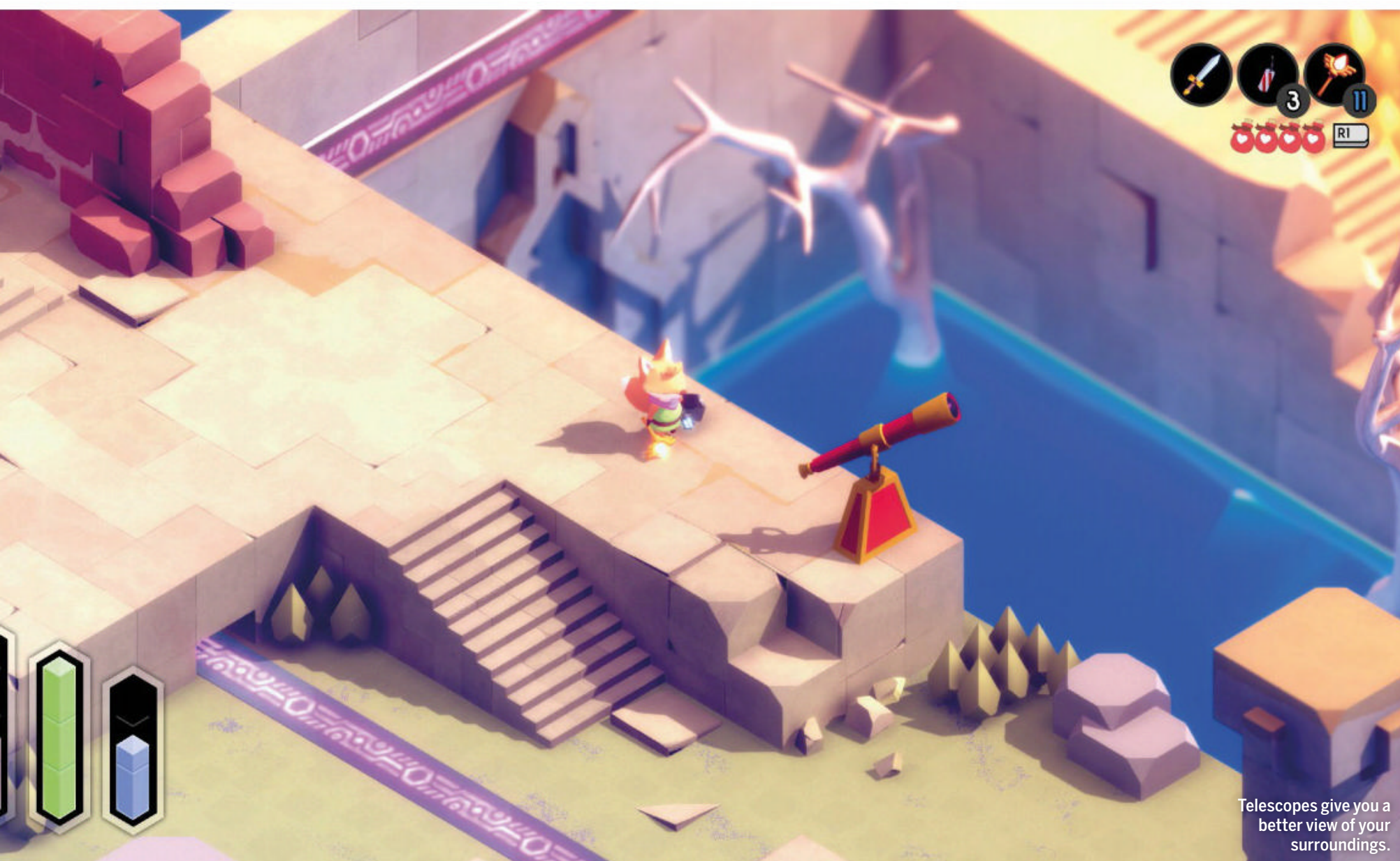
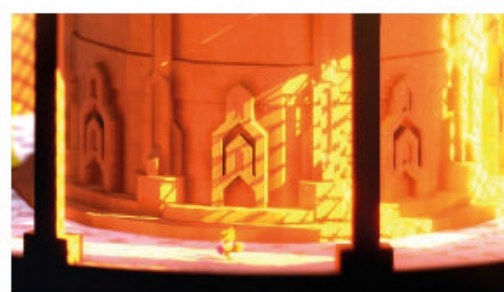
86

Like everything in *Tunic*, levelling up is a feast for the peepers.



FAR LEFT: Bosses will put your skills and patience to the test.

LEFT: These statues provide a safe haven, but also respawn enemies.



Telescopes give you a better view of your surroundings.

SWAMP THINGS

NORCO is a landmark moment for point-and-click adventures

By Alexis Ong

When people talk about *Norco*, they might mention its discerning use of science fiction, its punk roots, or how it resonates as a universal story about place and personhood. It's full of social commentary on capitalism in the real-life Louisianan town of the same name. But for all these lofty themes, it also nails something petty: the tiny weaknesses and hypocrisies of people looking for a place to belong.

Norco is the first game from the collective Geography of Robots, founded by writer/designer Yuts, who was born and raised in the town. The story follows Kay, a young woman who returns home to Norco to find her brother, Blake, in the wake of their mother's death.

As something of a nomad, she's been running from her roots in a post-apocalyptic America marked by homegrown militias, gentrification, and fraying infrastructure. The player switches

between Kay and her mother Catherine – not long before her death – as they get pulled into a surreal, tech-noir mystery. With its intense examinations of present-day problems, including a darkly funny look at the moving parts of the

average gig economy job, *Norco* is at once somber and biting funny.

In the finest tradition of old-school point-and-click adventures, there aren't really any mechanics beyond a few minigames and small QTEs. The puzzles are simple

enough by genre standards – if you've played enough point-and-clicks, it's really about how and what the dev is hiding on the screen – without diminishing the sense of satisfaction you get from solving them.

Playing *Norco* is a full-throated commitment to the story

SPECIAL KEY

Norco has a full-throated commitment to its story. To this end, each character in its ensemble cast has a well-formed persona – at least to the best extent that their allotted

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click narrative adventure with serious personality.

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Geography of Robots

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
GTX 980 Ti, Intel i5-4690K, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
norcogame.com

screen time allows. Every prickly drug dealer, partygoer, and Airbnb guest are scathing caricatures of the modern social scene, brought to life by Yuts' gift for dialogue. Private investigator Brett LeBlanc is a particular treasure, as well as Catherine's friend Keith – LeBlanc especially is a neat character study into the value of unexpected community ties and found family.

The mindmap system – a connect-the-dots-style web used to nudge the story along – mirrors both the player and Kay's need for clarity, with the added function of helping the player keep track of the game's major threads. On another level, the mindmap is an insightful alternative to point-and-clicks that rely on manipulating the game environment and collecting items – it forces the player to internalise and contextualise Kay and Catherine's decisions on a deeper level.

As you play, you come to realise *Norco*'s physical environment is already altered beyond repair, and the only thing left to do is find solidarity with the people who can survive. Perhaps because of the game's roots in the devs' lived experiences, it



ABOVE: Every inhabitant of the town has their own story to be uncovered.



One of many lavish soirees in the heart of the Shield Oil Refinery.



TOP: New Orleans' most iconic tourist location: the French Quarter.



RIGHT: Hell hath no fury like disturbed Airbnb guests.

forces us to re-examine our relationship with videogames as a medium for escapist pleasure. This is where *Norco* offers a refreshing challenge within its chosen genre, forcing the player to pay attention to the problems of their own world without turning away.

Understanding the heart of *Norco* is very much realising that the real protagonists in the game are the Garretts – a cult of obnoxious boys who end up driving the final act of the game. They evolve from pernicious ‘mall Nazis’ to a group of degenerates who tried, in their own misguided way, to actualise a sense of self. There’s a real depth to each Garrett subtype, elevated by Yuts’ unparalleled ability to build empathy and connection between the most disparate social identities.

Norco is a bastion of evocative storytelling that invites any player to take refuge in its world. But, it cuts deep as a sobering, but loving portrait of a modern dystopia – a community on the edge of great change. There are few games in the world like *Norco*, and it belongs unequivocally in the highest tier of narrative experiences in the medium today. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A must for anyone interested in narrative-driven games – nuanced, fascinating, and full of personality.

94



MEET THE GARRETTS

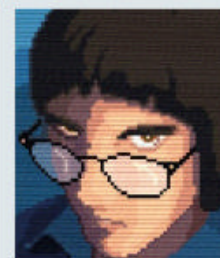
The development team invested a bit of themselves in these odd lads



SMILEY
A grotesque caricature of Yuts himself.



BEARDY
The hirsute Garrett was based on coder Aaron Gray.



GRUMPY
Anime-style barefoot Garrett has a touch of artist Jesse Jacobi.

THE OLD REPUBRICK

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA is a loving tribute to the films

By Ted Litchfield

I knew I was in for a good time with *Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga* when I began the Prequel Trilogy portion and saw Qui Gon Jinn and Obi Wan’s ship get stopped at a traffic gate floating in space. After a quick video conference with the Trade Federation, which saw them hastily try and hide their evil plans labelled “evil plans”, Qui Gon and Obi Wan breeze through the gate, accidentally knocking a hapless battle droid, sending it floating off into space.

The Skywalker Saga pushes its charm, with practically every cutscene featuring some visual gag or punchline at the film series’ expense. Kylo Ren is pumping iron and flexing as Rey contacts him in that infamous scene from *The Last Jedi*. Ben Kenobi pops some popcorn before watching Leia’s message to him in *A New Hope*. At the beginning of *Revenge of the Sith*, Lego Count

Dooku makes a cheeky plastic pop noise as Anakin scissors his head off.

This ribald sense of humour reminds me of the classic *Star Wars* parody, *Spaceballs*, in the best way, and it really centres the experience. *Lego Star Wars* has been working its strange magic ever since 2005, and the series’ keen sense of humour has often been able to elevate what might otherwise just be a soulless melding of two brands. *The Skywalker Saga* seeks to be the definitive entry,

covering all the ground of previous games in the series, as well as including *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* in Lego form for the first time. The result is a grab-bag of

different gameplay styles all lent just enough depth to make them work, held together by that through-line of humour and charm.

There’s an enormous amount of content on offer –

There’s an enormous amount of content on offer

though that does serve as a reminder of recent reports of crunch, bullying and high turnover of staff on the project at developer TT Games. The final product is full of joy, but the alleged human suffering behind it casts a pall over the game’s release.

BUILD ME UP

As in previous *Lego* games, every character, vehicle, and interactable object in the game is constructed out of Lego, with a commitment to the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A parodius Lego adaptation of all nine *Star Wars* movies with PS2-era gameplay sensibilities.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
TT Games

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 12600K, RTX 3070, 32 gig DDR5

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3xfvYj4

destructibility and creativity inherent to the medium. You’re often required to break down detritus and environment objects to produce the raw materials for puzzle solutions, and some playable droids can split in half to squeeze through tight spaces. The currency of the game is, as ever, ‘studs’, those tiny, one-peg pieces that always seem to find their way into couch cushions.

The actual terrain of the world and most buildings have always been realistic rather than made out of Lego in the series, and here in *The Skywalker Saga* the ludicrously detailed environments add another layer to the presentation. The underwater city of the Gungans on Naboo or *Star Destroyer* graveyard on Jakku look like they could be maps from a lost *Battlefront* game. Instead they’re inhabited by cute little Lego versions of iconic *Star Wars* characters. It has a similar effect to Mario exploring New Donk City in *Mario Odyssey*, a wonderfully absurd combination of cartoonish characters with an authentic world.

The charm of the setting also extends to the voice acting, a feature I wasn’t sold on before starting *The Skywalker Saga*. Back in the hazy prehistoric mists of the mid 2000s, I played a *Lego Star Wars* full of charismatic mimes pantomiming the events of the series, and change is a hard thing to deal with. Thankfully, *The Skywalker Saga* sells the dialogue with incredible voice acting talent.

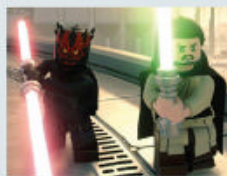
Not only is there a stellar cast of veteran voice actors, including old hands reprising their roles from *The Clone Wars* and other spin-offs, but several actors from the films return too. Brian Blessed as Boss Nass, Anthony Daniels as C3-PO, and even Billy Dee Williams as Lando are all a joy to hear here.

YODA MAY CRY

Mechanically, *The Skywalker Saga* is a jack-of-all-trades, mixing multiple genres over the course of its nine

CLASS WARFARE

The cast is sorted into archetypes, dictating their attacks and abilities



JEDI/DARK SIDE
Lightsaber combos and Force push. Say what you want about the space western stuff, but this is what people show up for.



SCOUNDREL/BOUNTY HUNTER
The space western stuff in *Star Wars* – this is what I show up for. Ranged attacks and bonus cash.



HERO/VILLAIN
Our non Force-powered protagonist types. Useful in any situation, and also able to hack certain special consoles.

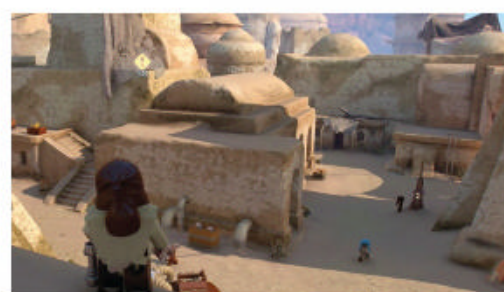


SCAVENGER
A unique class with the ability to craft puzzle-solving implements like a barrier-busting cannon.



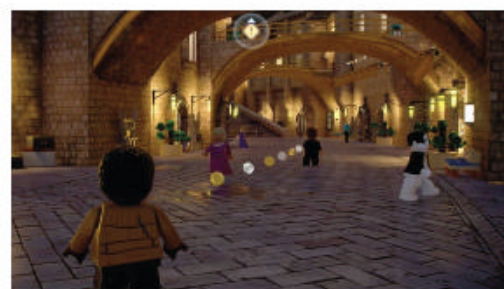
ASTROMECH/PROTOCOL DROID
Astromechs are needed to get past locks, and Protocol Droids can translate alien languages.

The 'code breaker' lugs around a lego dismantling tool.



LEFT: A wretched hive of hobbyist plastic construction.

BELOW: Apparently Qui-Gon Jinn doesn't even drink gin. Misleading.

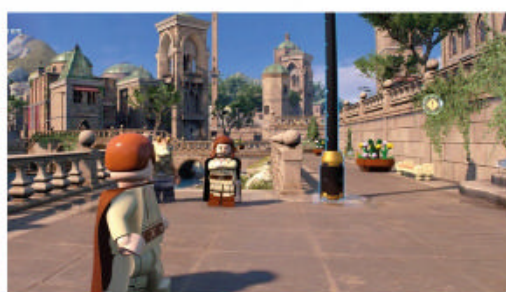




I have a similar morning routine.



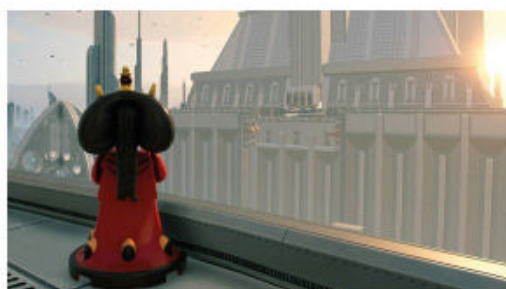
RIGHT: The streets of Theed look like something out of a fantasy RPG.



FAR RIGHT: The game gets a good riff over the infamous 'who shot first?' debate.



BELOW: I thought *Star Wars: 1313* got cancelled?



condensed movie campaigns and bevy of side content. *The Skywalker Saga* is most often a 3D brawler, with very easy encounters disguising a surprisingly deep melee combat system. With either lightsabers or fists you can launch opponents into the air and combo them into oblivion, divekicking and countering like Dante from *Devil May Cry*. Most enemies go down a little too quick to pull off anything crazy, but *The Skywalker Saga*'s many boss fights offer more opportunities for flashy stunt work.

Unfortunately, those same boss fights are a bit padded for my taste.

I don't mind General Grievous' multiple health bars so much as the fact that we have to take a break in between each one, with him running off in a cutscene followed by some mandatory battle droid clearing and light platforming and puzzling. It really kills my Duel of the Fates buzz, and it's a shame because otherwise those fights are where the combat actually starts to come alive for me.

Jedi characters also have access to a Force throw ability to pick up and toss objects and enemies, while non-Force powered characters possess rudimentary third-person shooting mechanics with their blasters. All of these options leave you with an oddly deep toolbox for how easy the challenges are. The game provides a stress-free sandbox with room to experiment at your leisure, but I wasn't taken with its combat, and *The Skywalker Saga*'s more drawn-out fights left me bored.

Outside the usual brawling, *The Skywalker Saga* also features some extensive space and aerial combat. I find the dogfighting to be a bit more engaging than battling on the ground. The challenges are still fairly straightforward, but being able to fly around and explore space made up for it. I'm especially fond of how *The Skywalker Saga* lets you tool around in planets' orbits between missions, shooting down meteors and ferreting out sidequests. As with the planetside environments, TT Games swings for the fences with its hi-fi space backdrops: the dogfighting takes place over some phenomenal skyboxes of Star Wars' colourful planetary systems.

The myriad planetside areas can be revisited at will following

completion of their story missions, and they contain various puzzles, sidequests and minigames, some of which can only be approached post-game when the correct character has been unlocked. You're limited to canonical cast members during story missions, but free-play lets you select from dozens of major and minor unlockable Star Wars

characters. This ties into a key long-term timesink of *The Skywalker Saga* – Kyber Bricks, this game's main collectible. There's over 1,100 hidden throughout the game, and I discovered only a little over a tenth

of them in my playthrough. In a series first, they also tie into a light progression system. You can invest them into upgrades across all playable characters, or small bonuses to individual archetypes like Jedi, Hero, or Bounty Hunter. Many of the more hidden Kyber Bricks reminded me of the creative Moon placement from *Mario Odyssey*, and I could see sufficiently motivated *Lego Star Wars*-heads investing the time necessary to find them all.

PHONE A FRIEND

The *Lego Star Wars* series has been defined by its commitment to drop-in couch co-op, and *The Skywalker Saga* is no different in this regard. With a second input method and the press of a button, a player two can take control of one of your secondary characters. This is perfect for laptop play in a dorm, or maybe if you're one of those new millennium dad types

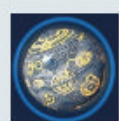
with a media centre PC, but it's not a great fit for desktop play, and *The Skywalker Saga* cries out for online co-op. TT Games hasn't implemented any online play system of its own, but there is Steam Remote Play to fill the gap. I'd never used the feature before, but it didn't take too much wrangling to get a friend of mine halfway across the country controlling Han Solo to my Obi Wan in A New Hope, all without him owning a copy of the game to boot. Unfortunately, this proved a bit too demanding an ask for one or both of our shaky internet connections, and the Comcast corporation proved the greatest opponent of fun in a galaxy far, far away. I lost my friend and had to invite him back three times over the course of an hour of play. As it stands, you'll need pretty reliable internet on one or both ends to enjoy online co-op in this game – and need to own the game on Steam rather than Epic.

The Skywalker Saga is not a particularly demanding game, and I was able to maintain a near-locked 144fps at 1440p with an RTX 3070, but the graphics menu is relatively sparse. I didn't have any significant graphical glitches or performance hiccups aside from the game resetting its refresh rate back to 60hz every time I quit and came back. What it lacks in graphics options, *The Skywalker Saga* makes up for with an impressive accessibility menu. I appreciated the multiple sizes of subtitles, different settings for health regen/static hp pickups, and making QTEs easier or even doing away with them altogether.

The Skywalker Saga is an impressive package, successfully adapting some of the most iconic sci-fi movies of all time with equal amounts playful mockery of and loving adherence to the source material. The only shame is that its sense of lively fun stands so in contrast to stories of the game's development, mismanagement allegedly laying undue stress and suffering on the people who made this whimsical journey possible. We can only hope that the developer's next project is delivered under much better circumstances. ■

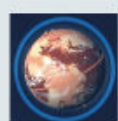
PLANETSIDE

The Skywalker Saga features a galaxy map with dozens of iconic locales



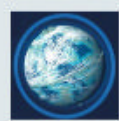
CORUSCANT

It may be ecologically unfeasible, but this planet is just so cool. Coruscant offers sci-fi vistas and a bit of fun waiting tables at Dexter's Diner.



TATOOINE

Classic for a reason, *The Skywalker Saga* really does justice to the Tunisian mud brick architecture used as the basis of Tatooine's towns and bazaars.



NABOO

I was impressed by *The Skywalker Saga*'s rendition of the underwater Gungan city, but its take on the capital Theed is something to behold.



KAMINO

All property is beachfront property, the interiors look like an Apple store, and it's populated entirely by aliens and Temuera Morrisons. A paradise in space.

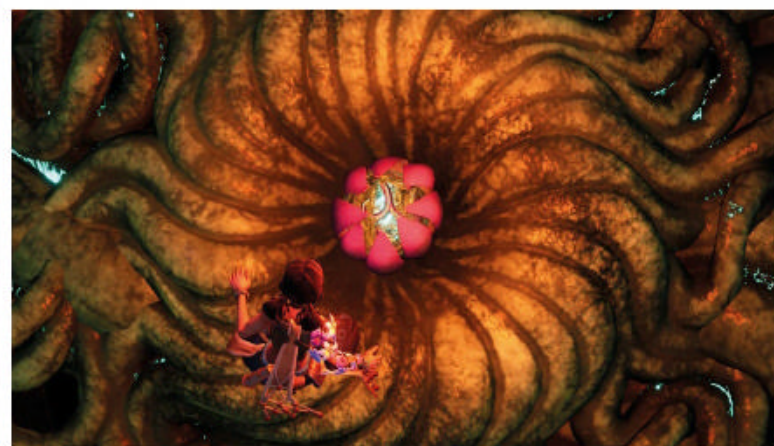
PC GAMER VERDICT

The Skywalker Saga's competent gameplay is elevated by its infectious and utterly charming sense of humour.

77



Oh, the pain.
Possibly.



RIGHT: This is not an attack. The Remnants are harmless.



BELOW: There is a great sense of scale.



Most of the ruins are off-limits.



BOTANY BAY

Exploring a watery and horticultural apocalypse in **SUBMERGED: HIDDEN DEPTHS**

By Matt Killeen

It's not a reassuring thought that once humans mess up the planet, they'll do it again in the aftermath, but it's entirely logical. In *Submerged: Hidden Depths*, survivors in the ruins of a world lost to the ocean anger a mysterious marine entity known as The Mass, by using its seeds as a power source for their worship of bygone electronics. Its wrath is total, turning everyone into tentacled echoes of their last living moments.

Giant, greasy, black vines choke the settlements and surrounding waters. The only way to make things right is for our cursed heroine, Miku, to return the glowing kernels to their host plants. The seeds of destruction are also the literal seeds of rebirth.

Or something. The central mechanic here makes immediate sense, but I found myself confused about pretty much everything else. It's not clear why she believes it's the only way for her brother to have a home, or what the process is costing the girl. The melancholy is evident, but the suffering really isn't. There's the suggestion that the City History collectables and unfolding narrative snippets will explain things, but they don't, really.

The game is going for the confounding vagaries of Alex Garland's *Annihilation*, and certainly they share an aesthetic. The crumbling worlds – both ours and that of its survivors – are well drawn, as you'd expect from former *BioShock* staffers, and there are a few excellent touches. Watching everything blooming into life as you pass carrying the seed is lovely. You'll find yourself turning to watch those sunsets and making good use of the game's Postcard Mode.

LEAF IT OUT

It's called *Submerged: Hidden Depths*, but you spend the whole thing on the surface, boating between deserted settlements and platforming in search of seeds, flowers, and other ephemera. This

is where I start to have real issues. The lack of combat makes sense, but there's no peril. Miku and her brother cannot die in gameplay and so it all feels very lightweight. Your interactions have visible results, yes, but what does it really mean? There's no rush, no danger, and the environmental puzzles barely warrant the name.

The lack of combat makes sense, but there's no peril

Movement in something like *Assassin's Creed* is largely automated, but never feels that way. You feel smart and heroic, with death a slip away, rather than someone holding down one button. Knowing that you can't fall in *Submerged: Hidden Depths* renders

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An exploration-focused platformer in a flooded world, with no combat.

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Uppercut Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 980 Ti, Intel i5-4690K, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
submerged.hiddendepths.com

the heights and crumbling environment like a soft-play barn.

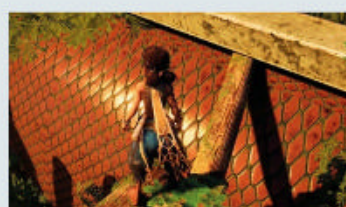
Here you move in the direction of a marked environmental hazard, and you lope through it. There's no timing and very little pathfinding involved. For a game about exploration, this is effectively an on-rails experience once you're inside one of the corrupted structures. There is a linear path, that you learn to identify as it's marked with red paint or illuminated plants, and you can't deviate, or indeed swim, which seems bizarre considering the world Miku and her brother inhabit. You can see other possibilities, but they're walled off. Every time you try to step over a stone to find an invisible wall or stand immobile in front of a ledge that you should be able to climb, it pulls you out of the illusion. There's no diegetic explanation for this sudden lack of prowess.

There are a few branches that take you to a collectable, but I found myself skipping these. There are plenty of doohickies to round up, long after you've finished the storyline, but other than upgrades for your boat there's little reward for it. I also got stuck in some scenery early on, which took two reloads and some frustrated jockeying to escape. That may be gone in the final build, but it discouraged exploration.

I really wanted to love this game. The idea of a conflict-free wander, healing the world that humans have destroyed to an excellent Jeff van Dyck score, seemed like a balm for turbulent times. This game falls short of such greatness, and certainly it needs a more satisfying conclusion. There's always a danger of wanting a game to be what it isn't, but I think it fails by its own standards. ■

PARKOUR WHAT?

Things you should be able to climb, but can't



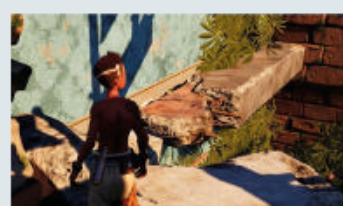
LOG
Eminently walkable planks.



TINY WALL
Surely I can just hop over?



ROPE
An insurmountable obstacle, unfortunately.



LEDGE
Come on, just let me shimmy across, I won't tell anyone.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An appealing and occasionally beautiful way to spend five hours. But you're just sight-seeing.

69

UNBALANCED

The pet physics aren't the only wobbly part of **WOBBLEDOGS**

By Ruth Cassidy

When you breed two dogs together in *Wobbledogs*, you're treated to a cutscene where a vast stone automaton of a dog mashes the two parents together in its giant hands while little hearts flow out of them. There are no other cutscenes in the game, and it seems to come out of nowhere. It's great, and out of proportion to the rest of the game, and feels like it's there for sheer joy. And honestly that is the spirit of *Wobbledogs* in a nutshell.

At a literal level, it is what it says it is. You raise and care for wobbly dogs through different life stages, until they either pass away or you choose to store them, indefinitely, which lets you hang on to their genes for future use. Between each life stage they mutate very slightly depending on their gut flora – there's a collect-'em-all type encyclopaedia on what to eat for which mutation – and breeding two dogs together lets you accelerate that through simulating multiple litters and generations into the one egg you want to keep.

This one mechanic is the most fun part of the game. You bring two wildly disparate dogs together – or two that will fix some horrible flaw

in a dog you love, like breeding out the too-flat faces on pugs that block their airways – and watch new litters of wobbly canines fall from the ceiling with a burst of confetti. It's an immediate bundle of personalities,

with affectionate dogs emoting hearts all over the place, and neurotic dogs anxiously barking, while the wobblest of dogs just tip over onto their sides and never get up again. You then pick two to breed again, or choose the

final dog whose genes are spliced into an egg in that majestic cutscene.

It's good, chaotic fun that fully exploits the premise, down to the background music becoming warped and distorted if you insist on destabilising the simulation with

The word 'dog' takes on a weird and wonderful new meaning

repeated inbreeding. But it's over when the egg is hatched: you get one dog from one egg, and – as far as I could tell – one egg from one adult dog. You're left muddling through the rest of the game to pass the time, which unfortunately isn't as finely honed as the rest of it.

The actual wobbly dogs themselves are great, and the word 'dog' takes on a weird and wonderful new meaning as I end up looking after creatures that look like sheep, rhinos, and... polka-dotted six-legged creatures not of this Earth. But most of the time I spend with the game is trying to work out how to have fun with it. There's plenty that's just there, like filling in the gut flora encyclopaedia, collecting decorations and achievements, and cleaning up after the dogs' endless spills, that my first few hours in the game feel directionless and box-ticky.

PUPPY LOVE

After I sort of stumble across how fun the breeding mechanic is, I switch to making separate pens for distinct breeds, so I could keep my tiny dogs in chicken nuggets and hamburgers to keep them stocky, and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A pet sim and physics sandbox where you care for and breed wobbly and mutating dogs across their lifespans

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

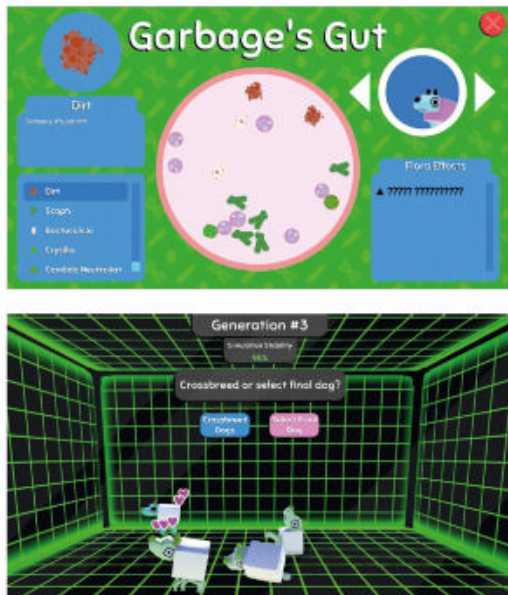
DEVELOPER
Animal Uprising

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800H, 8GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

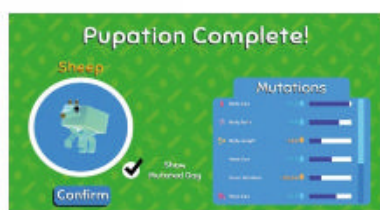
LINK
wobbledogs.com



TOP: I let Garbage eat like garbage, so his gut flora shames me.



RIGHT: Conked out, surrounded by food.



TOP: Small mercies: there's a quick clean button for this debris.

ABOVE: Dogs in the 'toy' room include Tiny, Baby, and Bear.

FAR RIGHT: We all grieve in different ways. For wobbledogs: cannibalism.

nourish my big and my colourful breeds in the same way. But having multiple pens seems to break them, because if I'm not looking at their pen, they won't sleep or play without being commanded to – which is also its own problem.

Even when the pet sim features aren't in crisis, they don't seem to do well, due to some ambiguous UI. It's not clear whether the dogs are stupid on purpose (as some dogs are in life), or whether the game is communicating badly. Is this dog refusing to do a task because there's a pathfinding obstacle, or is it sulking? And if I scold another dog for eating dirt, and it only learns that 'eating' is bad, is that a bug? Or a dog that can't tell that dirt isn't food?

Almost everything that isn't the dogs wobbling struggles with this kind of clunkiness. *Wobbledogs* feels like it was made around its core physics idea, and everything else was packed around to make it sufficiently 'videogame'. It's a great and chaotic physics toy, stretching the definition of 'dog' far, wide, and polka-dot, but the packaging dilutes it, and makes it more awkward to engage with. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

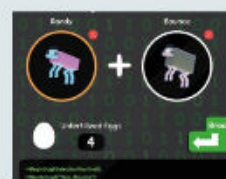
Wobbledogs is a joyfully chaotic physics toy that is unfortunately burdened by a clunky sandbox.

60



AN EVOLUTION

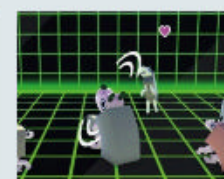
The birds, the bees and the dog_breeder_v0.6.01.exe



1 When two dogs love each other very much (read: they are adults), you plug them into a vaguely sinister matrix, to see how their genes – and stomach contents – smush together.



2 This first simulated litter has a little of Bounce's height and Randy's colouring, but after one, entirely stable generation, why not look a gift horse in the mouth?



3 After just one more generation, the new offspring look exceedingly dafter. You've got tiny heads, chunky bodies, and one little guy who can't support his weight at all. Pedigree perfect.



4 A further 13 generations is hubris, but you have to see the 'simulation stability' number tick down to single digits at least once. You know what's also unstable? These spindly-legged dogs.

END OF THE BEGINNING

As **GUILD WARS 2** hits its tenth anniversary, **END OF DRAGONS** reckons with its future

By Phil Savage

Since the release of *End of Dragons*, I've spent as much time in *Guild Wars 2*'s older maps as I have in its new Canthan region. This is an MMO that, in the nine years since its release, has never raised its level cap. The gear and weapons you earned before remain just as relevant today. In that context, *End of Dragons* doesn't just need to be good in isolation, but has to weave itself into the larger tapestry of the endgame.

Even now, a month after launch, it's hard to predict what its enduring legacy will be. But one thing is for certain: *End of Dragons* makes a great first impression.

The campaign is the strongest *Guild Wars 2* has delivered yet. In pursuit of a band of sky pirates, the player crashes into the continent of Cantha – triggering a diplomatic incident that results in the region being

reopened to the outside world for the first time in hundreds of years. As the vanguard of this new era of trade and tourism, you're quickly embroiled in the problems of the region.

Broadly I enjoy what ArenaNet has done here. *Guild Wars 2*'s writing has varied over the years, but tonally it can often feel too sarcastic. Here, instead, it's breezy – a fun adventure even as the story becomes steadily darker. Its characters are given enough space to work through their feelings as events unfold, but there's a lightness to the delivery.

More than before, the expansion takes *Guild Wars 2*'s current touchstones and structures them to create an obvious learning curve for players. For the first time, there's an area in the open world that explains and demonstrates concepts like combo fields and defiance bars. That knowledge is then reinforced through the story, and put to the test out in events – most dramatically on the game's final map. Built around its showpiece boss fight, Dragon's End is the most mechanically complex boss in the open-world. It's spectacular. And if you can complete it, you're

more than prepared to enter Strike missions – the current home of *Guild Wars 2*'s instanced endgame. The progression seems natural, and will hopefully result in more players

feeling comfortable tackling the game's more rewarding endgame activities.

Following the template set out by *Guild Wars 2*'s first expansion, *End of Dragons* also introduces a new suite of features

earned and upgraded through the Masteries XP system. It's an eclectic collection: fishing, skiffs, a little robot companion, a new mount, and a new hub zone that is home to the expansion's Strike missions, as well as vendors, services, and even a resting XP bonus. These are some nice

The campaign is the strongest *Guild Wars 2* has delivered yet

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The third expansion, and the finale to the MMO's long-running Elder Dragon saga

EXPECT TO PAY
£26

DEVELOPER
ArenaNet

PUBLISHER
NCSoft

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
MMO

LINK
guildwars2.com

quality-of-life improvements, but they don't fundamentally change my relationship with the game. Fishing is fun, but it's mostly self-contained. Skiffs similarly don't feel like they have a purpose when the Skimmer mount already exists.

The Jade Bot is the most useful. It's a jack-of-all-trades – offering a suite of options including a personal waypoint that you can place and teleport back to, an upward boost while gliding, and a free resuscitation when you're downed. It also lets you use the ziplines and terminals scattered around the *End of Dragons* maps. It's an eclectic tool in an already eclectic feature set, and while that gives it broad utility, it also means it's not as obviously desirable as *Path of Fire*'s mounts.

End of Dragons is a quality expansion, but also one that's arriving at a point when *Guild Wars 2* at large is going through a major transition. After years of what felt like neglect, the game has a renewed focus: moving to DirectX 11, revitalising World vs World through a new Alliances system, undergoing broad changes to profession and specialisation balance. In this sense, despite its name, *End of Dragons* isn't really an end. It may close out the Elder Dragon saga, but in every other sense it's a continuation of a game with a long, complicated, and sometimes messy history, that nonetheless seems committed to refreshing itself for the future.

End of Dragons carves a place for itself alongside nearly a decade's worth of maps, events and endgame challenges. That the quality of what it adds so often exceeds what came before leaves me hopeful that *Guild Wars 2*'s best days are still to come. ■

TURTLE POWER

Anatomy of the new mount

1 ARMOUR

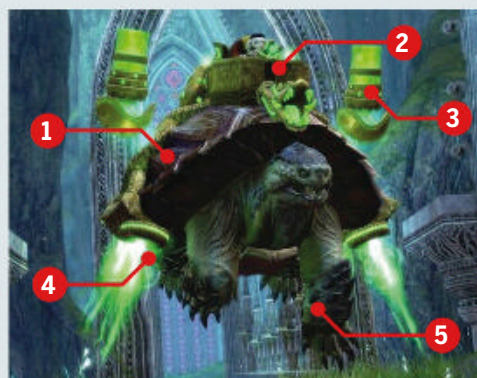
Thanks to a hard outer shell and weathered, leathery face, the Siege Mount has 40,000 health.

2 PASSENGERS

A two-seated saddle has room for two players, one to drive and the other to shoot.

3 CANNONS

The gunner can fire a volley that annihilate buildings. Hence the 'siege' part of Siege Turtle.



4 JUMPJETS

Turtles are traditionally slow, but this one is rocket powered. And once it's gone up...

5 FEET

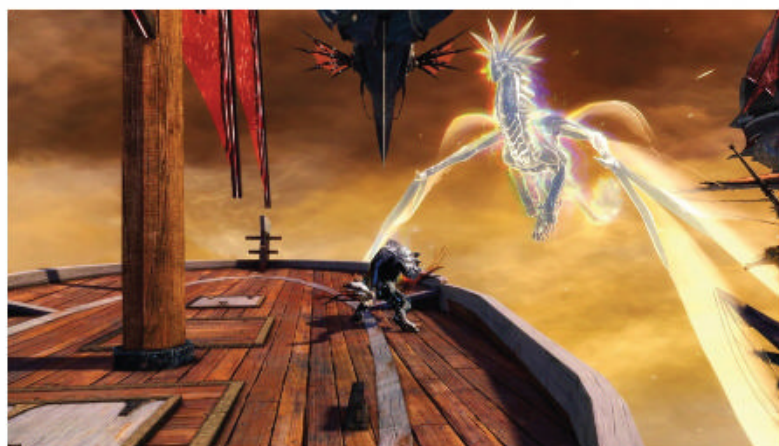
...It comes back down. Heavily, thanks to the slam attack that knocks down targets within range.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A worthy send-off to the Elder Dragon saga, and a good reason to be optimistic about the future of the game.

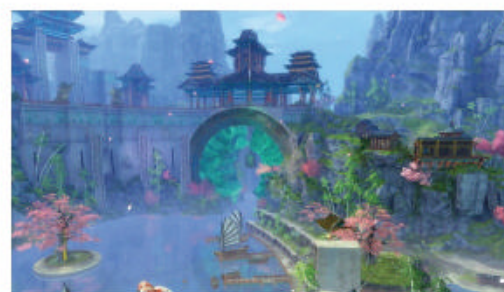
81

New ally Detective Rama. He arrests you, but it's nothing personal.



FAR LEFT: Siege Turtles swarm a meta event.

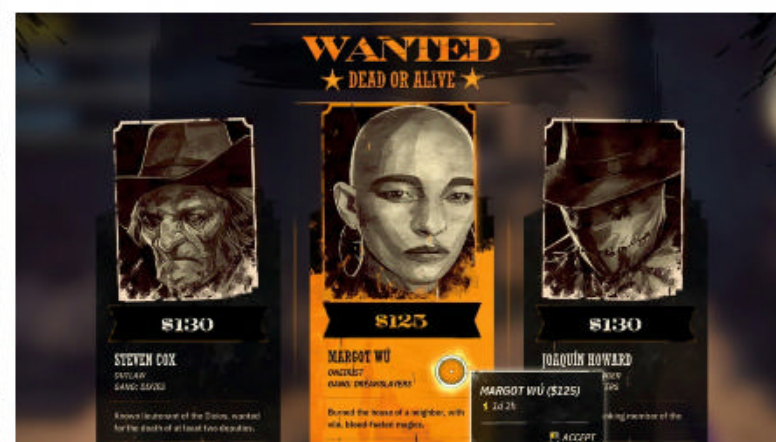
LEFT: When it all gets too much, unwind with some fishing.



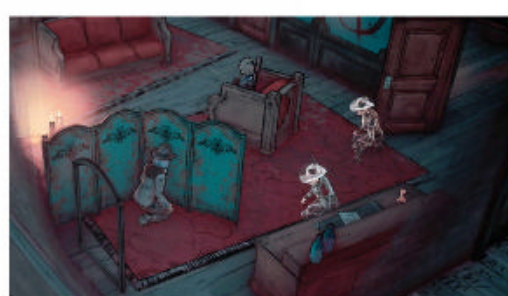
Preparing for a showdown.



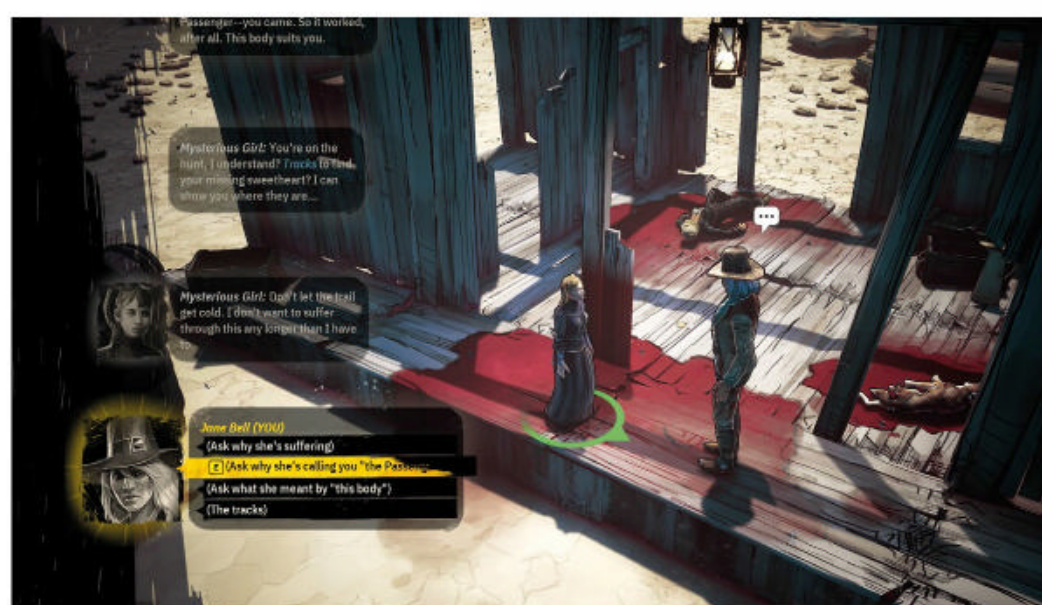
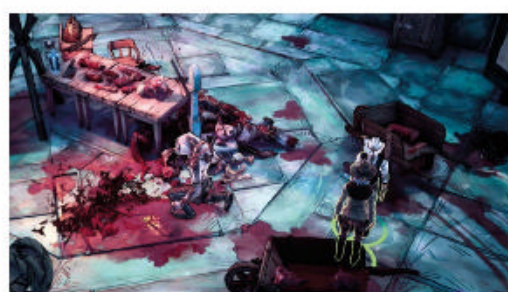
Pigmen are pitiable creatures, Frankensteined from pig and human parts.



RIGHT: Your followers are invisible during stealth, which feels like a cop-out.



FAR RIGHT: Throughout the game, you're taunted by mysterious ancient beings.



Even in daylight, there's a gloomy vignette filter you can't turn off.

WEIRD, WEIRD WEST

Top-down immersive sim **WEIRD WEST** offers a fistful of supernatural horror

By Tom Sykes

I've lived many lives as I've travelled around in *Weird West*. Bounty hunter, werewolf, pigman – that was a memorable one. And in every body I made the West a little better, or a little worse. As much as it's a game about constant micro decision-making – stealth or direct assault, Molotov cocktail plus oil barrel or revolver plus John Woo slow-mo dive – *Weird West* is just as concerned with the bigger picture as other immersive sims, including *Dishonored* and *Prey*.

That bigger picture begins in a familiar place: with a bounty hunter coming out of retirement. For the first few hours, I was tangling with outlaws in typical Wild West fashion and wondering where the weirdness was. You buy supplies in towns and pick up bounties before heading out, traversing an open world map stuffed with abandoned mines and isolated homesteads. More often than not, these locations are filled with enemies you can either sneak past or fill with lead, via fast-paced combat.

Stealth is typically my preferred approach, but here I used it as an opening salvo, as a prelude to the inevitable massacre when it all went wrong. That's partly because the fiction encourages it, and partly because of the murky visual style, which sacrifices readability for a grungy comic book aesthetic. I was forever zooming in, to better make out the characters, and zooming out for an overview, and generally getting myself spotted in the process.

When fighting does break out, it's refreshingly quick and replete with supernatural abilities. However, between that dingy visual style, and a complex twin-stick control scheme, I never found it all that enjoyable.

THIS LITTLE PIGGY...

Things pick up for the second story in the anthology, which puts you in the trotters of an unholy pigman mash-up who leaves his swamp to enact revenge upon a witch. All that promised weirdness comes out in a flood, as you chat with a sentient,

foul-mouthed tree and battle witches in ancient, subterranean temples.

Structurally, the five stories are similar, playing out as miniature CRPGs complete with sidequests and companions. You can even recruit the protagonists of the previous stories, each of whom has been marked by a mystical brand. These are stories with memorable characters including Pigman Joe, cursed so

he can only communicate in rhyme.

While each new chapter is a fresh start of sorts, certain elements persist, from the overarching story to the

You can even recruit the protagonists of the previous stories

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A top-down immersive sim set in the Weird West – a Wild West full of supernatural monsters

EXPECT TO PAY

£31

DEVELOPER

WolfEye Studios

PUBLISHER

Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

weirdwest.com

outcomes of major decisions and more minor actions.

To give an example – and it's a spoiler for the second chapter – you can choose to leave your fellow pigmen as soulless husks, or return their missing souls to their bodies. Pick option B and they'll go out into society, turning up in subsequent chapters as NPCs. Not every decision is as meaningful, but you do feel like you're having an impact on the world.

You can also turn settlements into ghost towns by wiping out their inhabitants. And that's not a part of the storyline, just something you can do if you want to. Kill everyone in the town of Grackle and the place will become abandoned. Bandits might even have moved in, next time you visit. Similarly, clear out a bandit-occupied town and its former residents may eventually return to their own homes.

In truth, you'll hardly miss one town if it falls to ruin, but the possibility is exciting – the thought that almost *anyone* can be killed, and the game will roll it. I tested this at one point, when a story ally attacked me in a scripted event. I died several times trying to win the ensuing battle – until I reloaded an earlier save and killed the ally before she could turn on me. The ambush still happened, but my attackers were now a woman short and easily beaten.

I'm sure there will be better examples once *Weird West* is out in the wild, and I keenly await those more creative anecdotes. The game's conclusion takes it all into account, so be mindful of the people you kill, and all the decisions you make. Far more than a lot of games with branching stories and morality systems, *Weird West* is watching everything you do. ■

WESTWORLD

A snapshot of *Weird West*'s hectic combat



1 BFF
Characters helped out in sidequests can become Friends for Life, meaning they'll appear randomly in battle. It's a lovely gesture, and you feel bad when they die.

2 POWER CURVE
Abilities are a mix of gun powers and character-specific supernatural powers, all of which are bought using Nimp Relics, found through exploration.

3 FOLLOWING THE LEADER
You can hire mercenaries in saloons, or recruit the former protagonists, who will bring their inventories across with them.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Look past the murky aesthetic and clunky combat: this is an exciting fusion of sim and CRPG.

79

CHAOS THEORY

Oddity reigns in **STRANGER OF PARADISE: FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN**

By Anne-Marie Coyle

The mere existence of *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin* is, well, strange. When Square Enix announced it was remaking *Final Fantasy VII*, it made sense. It was, after all, the game that put the world's most ironically named series on the map. An action spin-off inspired by and serving as sort-of-prequel to the now 35 year old and largely forgotten first game in the franchise, however, is an odd choice. The resulting game is even odder.

Stranger of Paradise offers a new take on the bare-bones narrative of its pixelated predecessor, with developer Team Ninja injecting the series with a more edgy tone. At least that's what it was going for, but cringe-worthy dialogue from over-the-top characters sees the game sail right by the realm of cool and land squarely in a field of cheese. Each of the game's characters can be summed up with one adjective. There's the spritely Jed, the stern Ash, the wistful Neon and Jack, who can only be described as driven, and driven by only one desire: to kill Chaos. For all its absurdity, the story is entertaining, with each level bookended by short snappy cutscenes that never feel like they intrude upon the action.

While it's more forgiving than *Nioh*, *Stranger of Paradise* does have more in common with the samurai-inspired Soulslike than *Final Fantasy*. Foes are thrown at you thick and fast, and being able to switch between classes and swap in and out abilities makes for encounters that are robust and gratifying. Battles are given extra depth thanks to Soul Shield, an alternative method to regular blocking that reduces an enemy's Break Gauge. Fully depleting this gauge allows you to swoop in with Soul Burst, a showy finisher that sees enemies turn to crystal before spectacularly shattering into tiny pieces. It's both slick and undeniably satisfying. You can also temporarily absorb certain skills with Soul Shield to use back against your enemies. Turning a Cactuar's deadly 1,000

Needles attack against the bouncy menace elicits a feeling of sheer delight if you're a *Final Fantasy* fan who's long been on the receiving end of this spiky signature move.

As solid as *Stranger of Paradise's* combat is, it's not without its shortcomings. Magic doesn't transition to the game's fast-paced combat quite as well as melee. You also only have the option to switch between two

Enemies turn to crystal before spectacularly shattering

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Soulslike *Final Fantasy* from the developer of *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Team Ninja

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-11700K, GeForce RTX 3070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3v4I37X

job classes on the fly. It's a curious limitation that's at odds with the freedom the game otherwise offers.

One element that could do with dialling down the variety is the game's loot system. Drops are so frequent that they become meaningless. Another case of too much comes from the constant chatter between teammates. Hearing your party question what could be in a chest every time you come across one quickly leaves you wishing your next lofty treasure haul would include some silencing potions.

JACK ATTACK

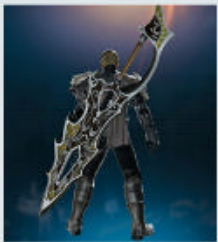
The difficulty settings make it pleasingly accessible. The standard 'Action' setting provides a considerable challenge that perfectly bridges the gap between mindless victories and frustrating repetition.

Locations, lovingly inspired by previous *Final Fantasy* titles, look nice, but it can be hard to see anything in the more shadowy sections. The game runs smoothly at 60fps but grinds to a snail's pace when cranked up to 120fps, particularly when you're performing an enemy shattering Soul Burst.

While it's not without its issues, *Stranger of Paradise* is a stylish and charmingly ridiculous adventure. The combat, environments make for a *Final Fantasy* title that shines despite its darker style. But while it offers one of the most dynamic combat systems the series has seen, its sketchy story and half-baked cast also make it one of the shallowest additions. This B-movie take on the series is rough around the edges, but nonetheless an enjoyable and fascinating reimagining of the aged escapade that started it all. ■

RECRUITMENT SPECIALIST

Some choice pickings from the Job system



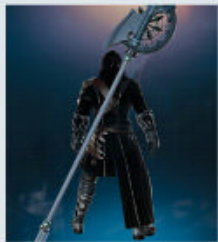
SWORDSMAN

The spinning slash can hit multiple enemies, making it a solid choice for those starting out.



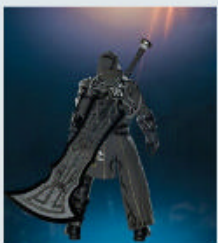
MARAUDER

Marauders deal heavy damage using axes. The Upheaval ability unleashes a crushing strike.



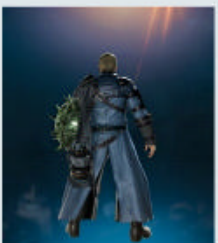
LANCER

This class can fight from a safe distance, throwing lances to effectively whittle down enemies.



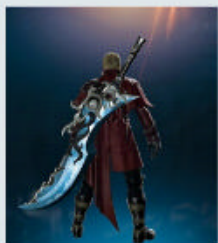
KNIGHT

These holy warriors can fight using Blessing of Light, which sends out a shockwave of light.



WHITE MAGE

Offers assistance by healing allies, summoning protective barriers, and reviving friends.



BERSERKER

The Berserk ability allows Berserkers to increase their attack power and stagger their enemies.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Team Ninja serves up some solid Soulslike combat with a generous helping of cheese in *Stranger of Paradise*.

72

This foe has a lot of heads, and none look happy to see you.

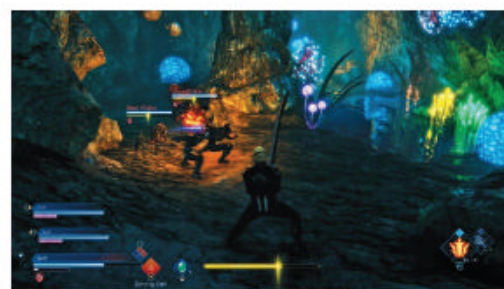


They always look like they're about to drop the year's hottest mixtape.



ABOVE LEFT: Soul Burst slays foes quickly and makes you briefly invulnerable.

LEFT: And so, their journey begins...

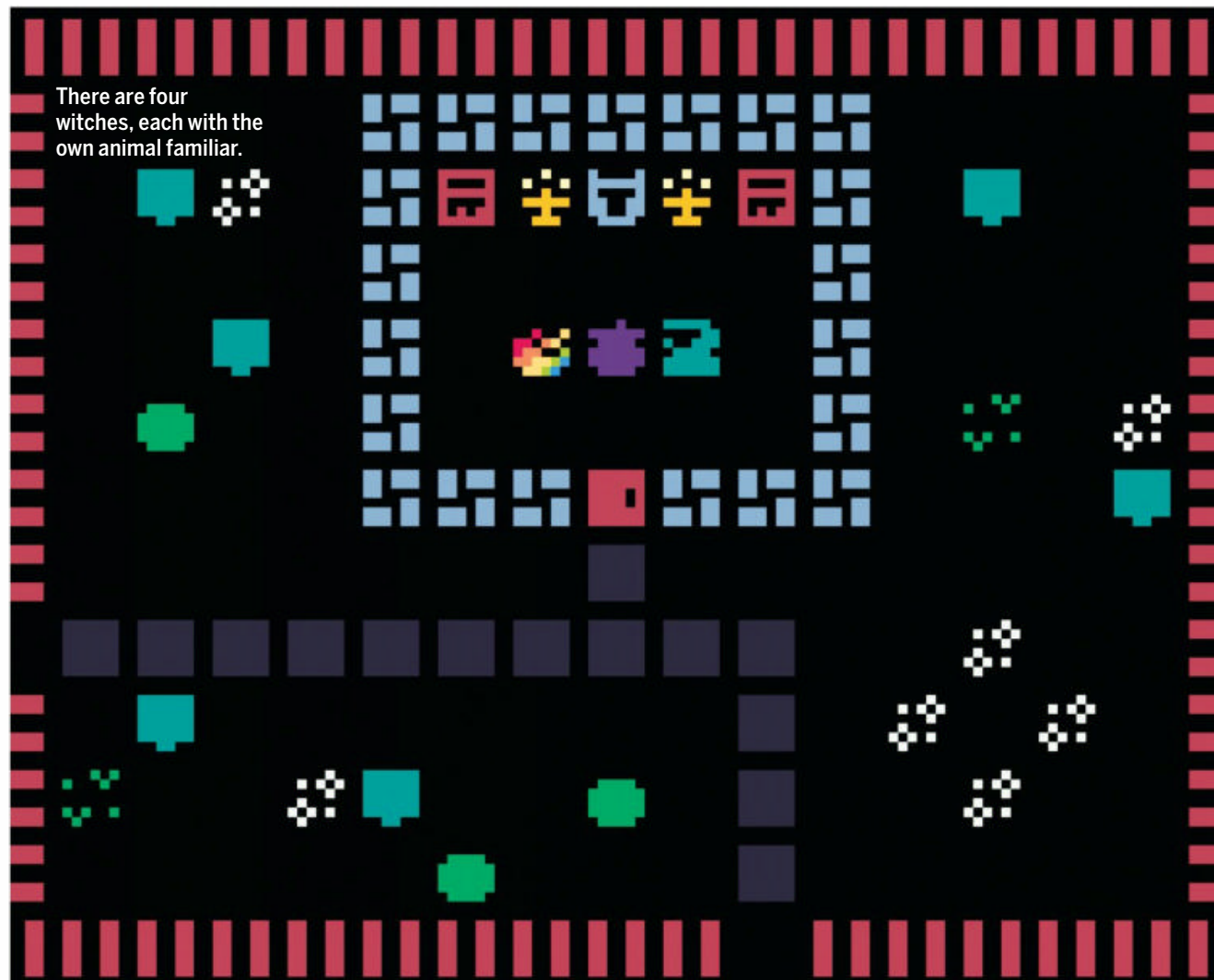


BELOW LEFT: Multiplayer allows you to swap AI teammates for real-life ones.



Physical attacks are ineffective against Flans. Magic works best.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes



BELOW: The pixel art is starkly low-res, but full of character.



HOP TO IT

Will the cosy **FROG FAMILIAR** put a spell on you?

There's a realm between spooky and cosy that *Frog Familiar* has carved a comfy little nook in. In this top-down adventure game, you play as a witch's amphibian familiar, who has to hop around a compact forest in search of ingredients. Imagine *The Legend of Zelda*, but un-imagine the combat and dungeons, and you'll know what you're in store for: a game of exploration and running errands for the charming forest folk.

Your main quest, and it's a fairly low-stakes one, is to gather various bits from around the low-res environment. We're talking mushrooms, herbs, bones, and a magic crystal, if you can find one. These items are dotted around the couple-dozen screens that comprise the game, leading you subtly to the many denizens that call it home, be they human, animal, skeleton, or ghost.

There's the shepherd whose sheep have wandered off, the vet helping wounded animals, and the lighting fanatic who wants you to illuminate every lantern you come across. It took quite a bit of work to pass an underground barrier, but my reward (aside from one tiny item) was an

enjoyable chinwag with a massive skeleton. I consider it effort well spent. With just some well-placed pixels and a few lines of charming text, these are memorable, friendly characters who contribute greatly to the cosy atmosphere – and who you'll be happy to go and fetch items for.

The world feels almost as intricate as one of the early *Zelda* games

FROG FRACTIONS
I completed the game almost without realising it, by which I mean I found

everything, grabbing every item and wrapping up every quest. I can't remember the last time I did that in a game, even if I initially wanted to – most games simply outstay their welcome. *Frog Familiar's* world feels almost as intricate as one of the early *Zelda* games, but it achieves this in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A top-down adventure game where you play as a cute little frog

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
dotmoon

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/FrogFamiliar

miniature. Over the course of about an hour, you'll go from a humble, hoppy frog to being at one with the forest, via a bunch of tools that will unlock pathways and let you hoover up every last collectable item.

The shears will let you shave every sheep, while the shovel will let you dig up graves. Thankfully, none of the ghosts seem to mind this desecration. There are coins to pay the ferryman, and honey for... someone who likes honey. It might sound like too much – too much for an hour's worth of game, perhaps – but any less could make this feel unsatisfying. It could make the forest seem small, when I look back on it now as a big and populated space.

I really was taken back to the old *Zelda* games, only without those enemies and dungeons to pad things out. *Frog Familiar* condenses that experience down into something you can finish over a lunch hour. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Frog Familiar is a cosy, *Zelda*-esque adventure that's no less satisfying for being a fraction of the size.

82

BELOW: The art's better than in many original Game Boy games.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Horatius.nyc

LINK
bit.ly/Traumatarium

TRAUMA CENTRE

Boy, is **TRAUMATARUM** a good game

Roguelikes have become so ubiquitous they've invaded history. Here's a roguelike made for ye olde original Game Boy – as in, you can download the ROM and play it on the actual hardware. You can also play it in your browser, delving into the dungeon to save an imperilled fantasy kingdom.

Traumatarium is a pretty simple game. I was reminded of the board game *Escape the Dark Castle*, which contains a dungeon made up of 15 shuffled event cards. That's how the world is constructed here, as a series of rooms presented in a random sequence, with randomised events occurring as you search each room. You're linearly shunted along, before you face the end game boss.

It's a game of taking, or avoiding, calculated risks. Winning the turn-based battles grants experience,

but in doing so you'll chew through items to recover your health. Should you try to avoid combat, and hoard your medicine for the upcoming boss instead? It's an engaging enough system, although I found that boss to be a pushover that I defeated easily on my first time through. Still, I was inspired to play the game again, where I was rewarded with a notably different-feeling dungeon.

The weakest element is the combat, which is turn-based but sorely lacking in options. You can attack, use an item and there's actually no third thing, no way to prevent the enemy damaging you.

While it's too small in scope to have been a legitimately published Game Boy game, *Traumatarium* is still a striking roguelike that is worth a play. ■

71

HOUSE OF FUN

HOUSE OF NECROSIS is an itchy, tasty horror roguelike

Some PlayStation-style games are convincing, while others feel like modern games with a couple of filters applied. Happily, *House of Necrosis* is the former. It's a traditional, turn-based roguelike mixed with a gory survival horror.

As in most traditional roguelikes, positioning is hugely important, as you close the gap between you and your enemies. If you move next to the enemy, you can hit them with your melee weapon, but they'll get an attack in return. This can really gouge your health bar, although there are ways to mitigate it. Firstly, you can shoot them from afar, using your pistol and its limited ammo. You can also level up in power, by deliberately seeking out enemies.

The one thing you *don't* want to do is approach a monster from the side or front, as they'll get a free

opening hit if you're in range. The margin for error is slight, while life-restoring herbs can be rare, so in every battle you have to move tactically. Shoot a monster to get its attention, then reach it first to secure the opening strike. Early enemies die in only two hits, so that's nice.

There is a bit of procedural shenanigans, as in many roguelikes. One run was bountiful with ammo, while others have been stingier. Sometimes you'll spawn in a room teeming with enemies. But on the whole I feel it's fair, while enemies can generally be avoided. It's only on the later floors that you wonder whether you should have killed them for the experience points.

This is a simple yet tactically compelling roguelike, with a grungy horror aesthetic that brought a smile to this old survival horror fan. ■

78

BELOW: I'd like a bit more meat to the combat. No, not that rotten meat.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Warkus

LINK
bit.ly/HouseNecrosis

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

In a happier alternate universe, this is the last scene of *Prometheus*.



DICK GRAYSON

Profanity and human pincushions in **BULLETSTORM: FULL CLIP EDITION**

Sometimes, trying to find the fun in a game is like looking for a lost contact lens. You scrabble around on the bathroom floor, with your knees pock-marked from the filth-encrusted mat and having ancient pubes sticking to your sweating, desperate paws. Then you look at the mirror and realise that the contact lens was stuck to your forehead the entire time.

There's probably a way of describing *Bulletstorm* that gives a less-revealing picture about the cleanliness of my lavatory, but hopefully you get the point. Some games hide the enjoyment under the blanket of story. *Bulletstorm* doesn't. It's obvious to the point of obscenity, but playing it again now feels like a rebirth. It's a game that understands what's brilliant about shooting baddies. There are no pretensions to high art. You'll never need to press a button to explore your feelings. Instead, you play a human sideburn who swears a lot and boots people into giant cacti. And it's brilliant.

It's unfair to make *Bulletstorm* sound like big, dumb, fun because there's actually nothing dumb about it. It's meticulously engineered for

pure enjoyment. Yes, there are dick jokes and chopped limbs, but you get the underlying sense exacting minds spent a long time ensuring it feels perfect when you kick a large man in the bottom. It's weird, because at times it's disarmingly pretty. I almost feel guilty for sliding past *Bulletstorm*'s grand scenery just so I can try to explode three men in a row. But, somehow, the balance of art and raw enjoyment is almost perfect.

Somehow, the balance of art and raw enjoyment is almost perfect

SARRANO HAM

Bulletstorm has an approach to fun ideas that's generous to the point of wastefulness. When you're not yanking enemies into perfectly-placed spiked walls, you're turning them into human grenades or flattening them with doors. There's so much creativity here it feels like

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Quips, whips, dicks, kicks – the cleverest stupid game ever made

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
People Can Fly

PUBLISHER
Gearbox Software

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bulletstorm.com

no human, irrespective of their capacity for fun, could fully appreciate it. It's like hungry drunks ordering food in an Indian restaurant. Yes, you might manage the skillshot lamb bhuna and the energy leash saag paneer. But the remote-controlled dinosaur section is the peshwari naan that will rupture your stomach if you even look at it.

Story-wise, it's less nutritious. Characters aren't so much drawn as they are fingerpainted in primary colours. Protagonist Grayson is the damaged alcoholic, Ishi the moralising spiritual one, and Trishka is 1995's approximation of an independent woman. And the big bad, General Sarrano, is so nakedly evil that he makes Albert Wesker look like Mr Ripley. But honestly, who cares? This is the wrong shop for nuanced characterisation. *Bulletstorm* only sells cheese... and I'm buying. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Bulletstorm is everything fun about first-person shooter games, written on the sole of a size-12 army boot.

84

BELOW: This the leafy beyond where wedding confetti goes when it dies.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£5.20

DEVELOPER
thatgamecompany

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

LEAF IT OUT

Having a breeze in **FLOWER**

A moment of honesty: *Flower* was originally going to be one of the shorter entries in this month's They're Back, but the prospect of following *Bulletstorm* with something so achingly earnest was entirely too tempting to pass up.

It's refreshing – almost like a detox for the fingers. The most violent thing that happens in *Flower* is some rocks almost falling over. But despite the calm, monkish focus, *Flower* can be exhilarating. There's a lovely sense of speed and fluidity from zooming around close to the ground and watching the beautiful grass part before you. It's also a zen experience, even if the effect is lessened for me when I decide that each section is the dying dream of a plant.

It sometimes stretches what I understand to be the definition of a

game – there's no challenge, no peril, no time limits – but that doesn't mean it isn't fun. There's a gentle progression to every section, and you'll probably come away from the whole experience feeling rather pleased with yourself for playing something that belongs in a museum. Like trying to step on a flying crisp packet on a breezy day, it's enjoyable in a way that's quite hard to describe, but I love doing it nonetheless.

There's very little to it – you whoosh about, things go green, flowers bloom – but the simple act of experiencing it is enough. And, unlike *Bulletstorm*, I'd be proud if a family member caught me playing it, rather than embarrassed. If nothing else, it's nice to imagine a bizarro world version of *Flower* developed by People Can Fly, in which a petal blasts some rocks to pieces. ■

86

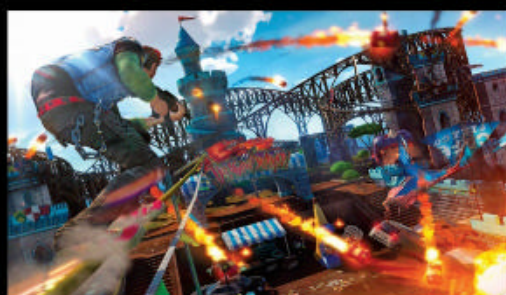


KATHY RAIN

For me the mark of a good point-and-click adventure is how much I actually want to listen to the descriptions. It's fine filling a scene with pointless stuff I can click on, but if the results aren't mildly amusing, what's the point? Kathy Rain, against my expectations, is surprisingly great at this, to the point I can't progress past the opening scene until I've examined my Christian roommate's God things and tried to mess up her bed.

The '90s setting and spiky protagonist make me wish this was on television when I was a teenager – the sort of show you watch before your mum calls you downstairs for turkey escalopes and chips. ■

74



SUNSET OVERDRIVE

This month's theme, apparently, is 'games that are weather-adjacent'. So *Sunset Overdrive* is a slight cop-out. But in my defence, you can't have a sunset without the sun. It's also an excuse to talk about a game that's fascinating just because it's so close to being God-awful. At times it feels like it was grown in a lab using memes and Mountain Dew. But despite being so self-referential it's thrice disappeared up its own backside, *Sunset Overdrive* is adorably, inexplicably great.

It's like an uninvited stranger turning up to your house party with a guitar, then learning they know all your favourite songs and they're not trying to bed your partner. ■

82



There's the twister, tail it.

NANCY DREW: TRAIL OF THE TWISTER

Most *Nancy Drew* games hinge on some kind of nefarious, far-fetched criminal enterprise. But a villain using weaponised bad weather is perhaps the most gleefully absurd. It's the 22nd game in the series, and there's very little here to set it apart: sedate puzzling, pointless chores, bad character models. Even among the *Nancy Drew* hardcore, *Trail of the Twister* is rightly reviled one of the weaker entries. But at least there are 21 other titles to help ease the sadness. ■

58

IF I HAD SOMEWHERE TO LIVE...

I COULD GO ANYWHERE IN LIFE



When Abi's mum died, life got tough. She didn't get on with her dad and the arguments became violent. Abi felt her only choice was to leave home. With just the clothes on her back, and no idea where to go, she ended up sleeping on the streets in the freezing cold.

Right now, you could give a homeless young person like Abi somewhere to start their future

Abi's life changed when she was given a room at Centrepunkt. A safe place to sleep and recover. A place to develop the skills and confidence she needed to rebuild her life – and leave homelessness behind for good. Now, Abi believes she can go anywhere.

Thousands of homeless young people like Abi are desperately trying to find their place in the world – but first they need a place to start again. **You could help right now by sponsoring a room at Centrepunkt for just 40p a day.**

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Call free on 0800 472 5798

Visit centrepunkt.org.uk/place

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YES, I WANT TO SPONSOR A ROOM FOR £12 A MONTH

Please collect my payment on the 1st/15th of every month (please circle preferred date).

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit



To the Manager:
Name and full address of your
Bank or Building Society:

Originators Identification No. 659107

Postcode

Name(s) of Account Holder(s)

Bank Sort Code: - Account Number:

Instructions to your Bank or Building Society: Please pay Centrepunkt Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction, subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Centrepunkt and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Signature(s) Date

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account.

Increase your donation by 25p for every £1 you donate with Gift Aid *giftaid it*

☐ By ticking this box I confirm I am a UK taxpayer and want Centrepunkt to Gift Aid all donations I've made in the last four years and any donations I make in the future until I notify you otherwise. I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in any tax year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

Your name and address are needed to identify you as a current UK taxpayer.

Full Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____ Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Thank you for donating to Centrepunkt today.

We'd love to show the impact of your support and share how young people continue to need your help, through newsletters, fundraising appeals and information about events. Please let us know how best to stay in touch with you by adding your details above, and ticking the relevant boxes:

☐ Please contact me by email ☐ Please contact me by phone

Last year our supporters helped us change the lives of over 15,000 homeless young people. By letting us know we can count on you, we can continue helping young people with a home and a future.

Your privacy is key.

We promise never to sell or swap your details, and will always keep them secure. You can view our Privacy Notice in full at www.centrepunkt.org.uk/privacy. You can opt out of post and change how we communicate with you at any time. Please call 0800 232320 and speak to one of our friendly team or email supportercare@centrepunkt.org to do this and ask us any questions.

Please return this form to: **Freepost Plus RTXY-LBEA-UTJJ, Angel Fulfilment Services Ltd, Communication Centre, Par Moor Road, Par PL24 2SQ.**

Registered office address: Central House, 25 Camperdown Street, London E1 8DZ.
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VAT registration no. 649 345 018.



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Are the GPU shortages finally over? PC Gamer investigates.



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Who needs emulation when you can build a new old PC instead?



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BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the right build for you with our expert parts lists.

GROUP TEST

RACING WHEELS

Wheels to stop you careening off the track and start your virtual racing career off right

By Jacob Ridley

In my opinion there's no better peripheral for your PC than a racing wheel. I enjoy VR headsets, though they're pretty great even without a PC at hand; and a flight stick really feels crucial to a fun flight sim experience. But it's the racing wheel that I find myself using most often – so much so that one is a permanent fixture on my desk nowadays.

There are many different racing wheels vying for your cash, however. You'll find multiple varying underlying technologies powering each wheel available – each with their own positives and negatives, fans and critics. I've tested and reviewed six of the best on the market to see which is really going to deliver a true-to-life tyre-screaching experience for avid and casual driver alike.



GT DD Pro

FANATEC £609

Direct-drive world champ

1 The Fanatec GT DD Pro sets a high standard for all racing wheels. With a direct-drive motor it's capable of throwing the wheel around with so much force you're holding on for dear life. Trust me, you want that. You feel every bump or loss of traction with the GT DD. I noticed my own lap times started improving once I could really hone in on where I was losing grip and speed during a lap. Granted, I had a few meetings with the barriers along the way, but I felt like I was really able to develop my race as a result.

The GT DD's construction is pretty much immaculate. The

wheel base is this solid metal, passively-cooled monster, and into that slots a simple and sturdy clamp. The wheel itself is one of my favourites of all those I've tested, delivering a banquet of buttons that are easy to get familiar with. The included CSL Pedals don't come with a clutch nor a load-cell brake. Though you can upgrade to a load-cell kit sold by Fanatec, which replaces the brake and leaves the spare brake to become a clutch pedal.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Accurate, powerful force feedback
- Excellent build quality
- Direct-drive for less

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** DIRECT / **PEDALS:** 2, UPGRADEABLE WITH LOAD-CELL + CLUTCH / **TUNING:** VIA DESKTOP APP, WHEEL

T248

THRUSTMASTER £300

Budget wheel for serious drivers

2 The Thrustmaster T248 is a far more budget-friendly option to the Fanatec GT DD, but it doesn't let up where it counts. The force feedback it delivers is a lot more impressive than you might expect and it's exceptionally accurate. Inside the T248 you'll find a hybrid force feedback system that utilises a gear alongside a belt. That pretty much covers off the downsides of the geared system, which have been known to feel clunky at times, but still has all the benefits of a belt system. Plus that keeps it cheap.

The T248's hybrid system has appeared to come at the expense

of some of the finer touches, however. The build looks and feels cheap. Similarly, it's awfully loud, especially the shifter paddles. These are, however, incredibly responsive, like nothing I've used before. The T248 gets a lot technically right, and when it really comes down to it I'd take precision over aesthetics any day. If you want to develop your racing ability and learn to corner consistently, this is the best wheel to do it on a tighter budget.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Technically impressive
- Surprisingly powerful force feedback
- Hybrid design feels great to use

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** HYBRID (BELT/GEAR) / **PEDALS:** 3, WITH 4 BRAKE TUNING MODES / **TUNING:** VIA WHEEL

1



2



WHAT MAKES A GREAT PEDAL SET?

There was a time when pedals bundled with your average racing wheel were an afterthought, but that's no longer the case. Most competitive wheels today make a big fuss on getting their pedals to feel realistic and last a long time.

The brake pedal is what you'll find most of that effort goes toward. Top kits mimic a real car with a load-cell brake pedal. These use pressure measurements to accurately relay your furious stomping into the game. Cheaper sets may try and feign this by using springs or squishy foam to gradually increase the pressure required to depress the pedal. The best pedals are often simply the ones which are easily customisable. If you can ease up on the braking pressure to suit your style, you'll be cruising happily for longer.

GROUP TEST



4



G923

LOGITECH **£350**

Easy to use and simple to set up

3

The Logitech G923 comes from a long line of very similar wheels. That's both a blessing and a curse. The actual tech powering the G923 is a little lacking next to newer models, such as the T248, though it's widely supported in games and has been fine-tuned to a high grade.

The Logitech G923 uses a dual gear-driven system, meaning it's a little less refined in its feedback than some. It is very impressive how it manages to transfer relatively minor vibrations through the wheel to give you the sense of driving on a real track, however, helped along

by its proprietary TrueForce feature. The included brake pedal really requires some stomping to put to the metal, which is a plus, and the included carpet grip system helps keep this set firmly in place. With a high standard from wheel to pedal, the G923 is a real all-rounder. It's better suited to casual racing games and throwing around in *WRC 10* than some of the others I've tried out, though. The more serious racer may prefer the T248.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great build quality
- Pedals are great on carpet
- Zero fuss compatibility

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** DUAL-GEAR / **PEDALS:** 3, WITH CARPET GRIP SYSTEM / **TUNING:** VIA LOGITECH G APP

WITH A HIGH STANDARD FROM WHEEL TO PEDAL, THE G923 IS A REAL ALL-ROUNDER



3



5

T300RS

THRUSTMASTER £330

A PC Gamer favourite

4 The Thrustmaster has sat as our #1 pick for the best racing wheel for a few years now. Even though it's a little older, having originally been released in 2014, it's still plenty deserving of a top spot in 2022. The T300 RS has aged better than a lot of modern tech, with mods and support aplenty.

The fact you can even pick up a T300RS today is a miracle, but what's better is that you'd be buying a dual belt-driven design for highly responsive force feedback that remains impressive to this day. It delivers smooth response from the track with the benefits of the extra power that only a belt-drive system can

deliver in lieu of a bigger motor. The wheel on the T300RS can also be removed and replaced, which isn't something you can do on the T248. The T300 RS is pricier than the T248, however, and doesn't come with a clutch pedal. That's the trade-off you have to make here: more impressive force feedback and a removable wheel at the expense of the mod cons. There's a good case to be made, but you could also get the T300RS GT Edition if you want the best of both.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent dual-belt design
- Removable wheel
- Widely supported

SPECS FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / DRIVE: DUAL-BELT / PEDALS: 2, UPGRADEABLE / TUNING: VIA DRIVERS

TMX Force Feedback

THRUSTMASTER £200

A cheaper way to get into racing

5 Cheap racing wheels are easy to come by; cheap racing wheels worth your money are not. Thankfully, we once again can turn to Thrustmaster for an option here. The TMX isn't as flashy as most – you're really trimming back to basics. The pedal set is pretty slim with just two unexciting levers on a plastic base, and the wheel itself features only the absolute basic buttons you'll need to operate it in-game and nothing more. It's slimmed to the bare essentials, but really that's what we want at this price.

That's because what really matters is the force feedback

within, and the TMX shares its belt-pulley system with the popular T150. It's definitely a less powerful system than the other Thrustmaster and non-Thrustmaster systems on this list, but it's present enough that you'll be thankful it's there.

With the TMX you can be sure you're making a good start in your sim racing career, and if it ends up in a cupboard most of the year, you won't feel too much regret thanks to its wallet-friendly price tag.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Affordable
- Focus on the essentials
- Basic inputs

FORCE FEEDBACK: YES / **DRIVE:** BELT-PULLEY / **PEDALS:** 2, UPGRADEABLE / **TUNING:** VIA DRIVERS



TAKING STOCK

GPUs are finally becoming affordable again – but should you actually buy one?

We thought it might never happen. GPU prices have been wildly inflated for as long as Nvidia's been trying to explain ray tracing. Through a perfect storm of market conditions, it's been nigh-on impossible to buy an RTX 3-series card since their release in September 2020 and just as exhausting trying to get a high-end 2-series card before that. But at long last, prices are starting to fall.

Just in case you're emerging after several years from a *Fallout*-esque vault, this pickle was created in the first place primarily by the coronavirus pandemic. Cryptocurrencies, particularly Bitcoin, saw a massive increase in value during lockdown, and that encouraged crypto farmers to buy all the available high-powered GPUs on the market. When Nvidia launched its new RTX 3080 TI, it became the de facto mining card from Q4 2020 to present, and that high demand affected its availability. With Nvidia erstwhile supplying the larger portion of the gaming market, attentions turned to AMD's cards. But AMD, too, were quickly overrun by demand.

But that, of course, was only part of the problem. Because the lockdowns were also creating a global semiconductor shortage. With people sitting at home instead of mining resources and manufacturing PCBs, far fewer GPUs were being constructed than they would otherwise have been in

everyday life. Much higher demand than expected, much lower manufacturing frequency, and a backdrop of wider financial turmoil. You really couldn't design better conditions for unfeasibly high graphics card prices.

PRICE DROPS

2022 is starting to show a pinprick of light at the end of a very, very expensive tunnel. GPU stock levels have improved this year to the degree where many retailers have at least *some* models in stock at any given time, and at least a stock replenishment ETA on the cards not currently in their warehouses. That's allowed a bit of easing on pricing, which settled down to about 25% above MSRP on average in early 2022. It only speaks to what a grim situation we were in previously that we consider that an encouraging sign.

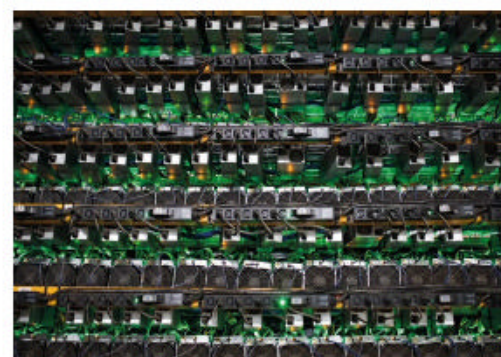
It's not just the stock levels that are improving, either. Nvidia announced to its AIC partners earlier this year that it had found cost-saving efficiencies in the manufacturing process of its current generation cards of around 8-12%, which it will be passing on to partners. Assuming those partners and system integrators pass the saving on down to the consumer, such a manufacturing efficiency increase means prices even closer to MSRP.

Then come the crypto farmers. It's no longer as profitable to run server rooms full of RTX 3080 TI rigs chipping away for Bitcoins as it was in 2020, which means the stage is set for a



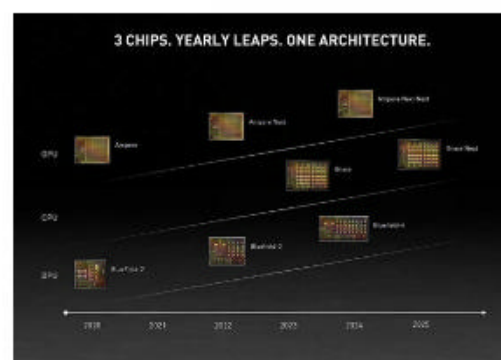
Enemy mine

Why is cryptomining no longer as profitable as it was? Nvidia's Lite Hash Limiter, intended to curb usage on the company's GPUs for mining, is certainly a factor. The January crypto crash also thinned out the margins of cost-effective enterprises somewhat, prompting many miners to shut down operations.



FAR LEFT: Nvidia's ferocious new 3090 TI had to be introduced at a lower MSRP than planned.

LEFT: Coming to an eBay auction near you? Many crypto farmers are selling up.



THE PRICE IS ALRIGHT *Higher or lower? Nvidia MSRPs over time*



GEFORCE GTX 770: £329 2013
Over £300 for Nvidia's 'sweet spot' card seemed pricey at the time. 2013 was a different world, wasn't it?



GEFORCE GTX 970: £259 2014
Ah, the god card. Significantly cheaper than the previous gen's equivalent, insanely powerful.



GEFORCE GTX 1070: £410 2016
Two years after the 970, a tricky manufacturing process and low die yield pushed up the 1070's price.



GEFORCE RTX 2070: £420 2018
Anyone actually bag a founder's edition for this price? Unlikely – even pre-COVID, crypto mining drove up demand.

lot of GPUs – the ones we've been trying to buy for a fair price this whole time – to enter the used market. All these factors put pressure on both Nvidia and its hardware partners to start shifting stock, and fast.

Asus was first to take the jump. The manufacturer announced in March that it would be dropping prices "aggressively" across all SKUs, bringing good news on two fronts. First, that at least one manufacturer's GPUs are cheaper on storefronts. Secondly, this statement indicates we've reached a supply chain tipping point.

Graphics cards hold their value based on demand and scarcity, but also on their technological relevance and longevity. We're deep into the expected lifespan of Nvidia's RTX 3-series cards now, and there will come a point at which they're outdated either by Nvidia itself with a new product launch, or by AMD capitalising on its rival's hesitancy to do so.

In short, now that supply is building up, there's a race on to shift all that stock while it's still cutting edge. Ordinarily this doesn't result in extreme price drops between GPU generations, ironically since the spike in interest for those cards about to be outdated is created by people looking for bargains, and thus manufacturers don't actually have to discount the old stock to shift it. Instead, a higher MSRP on the new stock is established.

WHY BUY NOW?

For us down at consumer level though, the limited lifespan of Nvidia and AMD's current cards is something to seriously consider and give pause. In many ways they still feel like new cards, simply because they've hardly been available since

launch, but both manufacturers are already preparing the launches of their successors. In Nvidia's case, the RTX 3090 TI is already here, and at a lower MSRP than originally planned had it hit its initial January release date. That already puts the squeeze on RTX 3080 TIs and RTX 3090s

That puts us on shaky footing when purchasing a card. Even as prices are settling down to something close to MSRP, much of that value can be attributed to scarcity and demand. What happens when demand shifts to a newer, more powerful series of cards? What did we just spend our money on?

In short, it's prudent to wait even longer before buying that elusive graphics card you've been Jonesing after since the pre-face coverings world. Doing so opens up the possibility of two beneficial scenarios to you: one, that the current models will pile up in surplus and manufacturers will have to cut their prices to shift them, or two: you could spend equivalent money on a newer model just months from now. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

THERE'S A RACE ON TO SHIFT ALL THAT STOCK WHILE IT'S STILL CUTTING EDGE

MUSEUM PIECE

My four-year quest to source a very special **PACKARD BELL PC**

Remakes are great. Not only do they get modern developers off the hook from having to think of genuinely new things for us to do in virtual worlds, they also make it far more convenient for us to indulge in our more nostalgic passions. There it is, look, effortlessly running on Steam in 4K: your childhood obsession. The gateway to a lifetime of subsequent PC game exploration. All you have to do is click 'new game' and you're back in that cosy, familiar world again, and now in widescreen.

But you don't do it. It just... doesn't feel right. Remasters are generally about conjuring treasured memories, and to a certain, broken subsection of us, any minor deviation from that memory is a dagger through the ventricle. Updated textures hurt. Improved lighting makes us convulse.

These new releases of old classics, then, can never truly compete with the originals because they can never be as faithful as the real thing. No, what you *really* want is to reproduce the conditions of 1998 so precisely that it takes four years before you can click 'new game'. You want to source the exact parts of your first personal computer, assemble them in a sacred corner of your home, and use that corner to truly travel back in time through games. Here's how I went about it.

The first step is acceptance. One must accept that running a virtual machine on a modern PC and installing Windows 98 on it isn't going to scratch the itch, and neither is DOSBox. If we have an interest in playing an old game in the first place, that interest is about enjoying our own memories and taking pleasure in observing the changes between then (whenever then might be) and now. Playing *Rogue Spear* on a VM doesn't feel that much different to watching a video of it on YouTube. Playing it on a CRT monitor and a Voodoo 2, however, is like being back at its release date.

A CAN OF COMPRESSED AIR DOES WONDERS AT THIS STAGE

featuring the original hardware – an Intel Pentium II 350MHz processor, a 3DFX Voodoo 2, and 64MB of SDRAM.

A can of compressed air does wonders at this stage. Not just for the aesthetics of your new objet d'art, which probably has 20 years of dead skin and carpet fibres caked around its fan blades, but also for... the smell. But let's not dwell on that.

I found the exact model of keyboard within a month, too. If it had been missing its distinctive wrist rest that would have been a deal-breaker, but fortunately someone out there is as

BID FOR VICTORY

anally retentive as me and kept the two together for a decade and a half. Which means you're going to be spending a lot of time on eBay. I got lucky with my original PC tower, a Packard Bell Platinum 350 – one showed up just weeks after I first created an alert for 'Packard Bell vintage PC'. A short courier journey from Scotland later, the beating heart of my time machine was here, still

Compressed air's also very welcome on a vintage 'board to clean out the bits of Discos and Nik-Naks that fell down there when Westlife were still charting'. Authentically '90s membrane clickety-clacks: check.

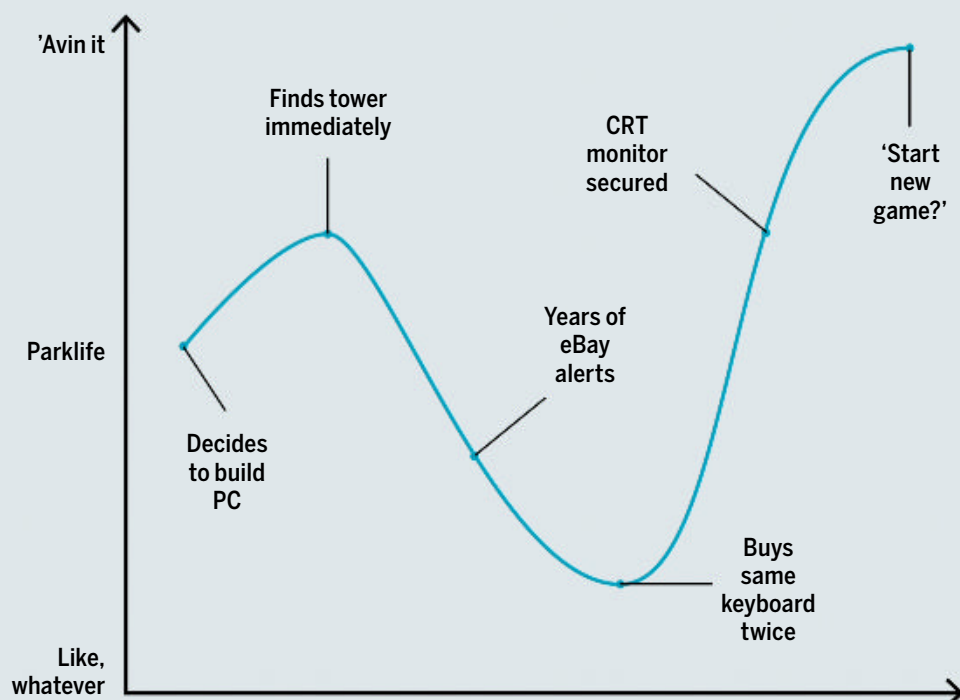
About two years later, the mouse appeared. People don't fetishise beige computer mice the way they do vintage Razer Boomslangs or the components that live inside the case, so it was always going to be a long shot to find a very specific and uncelebrated model of PS/2 ball mouse. As it happened, the seller was offering it with my exact keyboard. So I have two now.

MASTER SYSTEM

It was only after getting this far, two years in, that I realised the remaining items I had yet to find were in many ways the most important: the CRT monitor and the master discs. We already passed the point of reason many paragraphs ago, so at this point

MACHINE BUILDING

Plotting Phil's '90s immersion level over time



PHIL IWANIUK

Ever hired a fragile goods courier that specialises in moving antique chandeliers to deliver a 20-year-old monitor to your house? Phil Iwaniuk has. We're all so terribly worried about him.





I'm not ashamed to tell you that connecting the Packard Bell tower to a modern 16:10 monitor and booting to vanilla Win98 felt wrong in a way that made me genuinely disappointed in myself, like I'd snuck into my parents' bedroom and uncovered my Christmas presents on the first week of December. The right monitor, a 17-inch Packard Bell 7480 outputting at 1600x1200, summons memories you'd forgotten. It's like looking directly at 1998, in a way that's hypnotic and mesmeric.

And then, around four years after I started this ridiculous quest in 2017, the master CDs came up. Windows 98 isn't special to the retro gamer – we all know it far too well. But Windows 98 with all the bloatware we mucked around with, and all the branded desktop backgrounds we perused, is another level still of immersion.

Now when I play *Unreal*, I don't just enjoy some retro graphics. I enjoy the sound of an old PC booting, the anti-static boom of the screen, the tinny audio of its built-in speakers, and the feel of headshotting with a heavy old ball mouse. It's nirvana. No remake could possibly compete. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Old classics look radically different on CRTs at era-appropriate resolutions.

BELOW: Eat your words, Thomas Wolfe. You *can* go home again.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

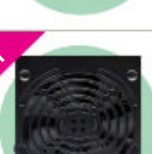
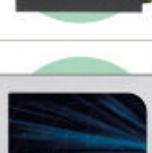
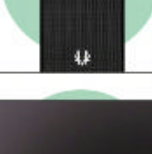
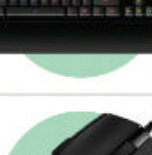
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£952

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400F Intel £170 There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3050 Nvidia £239 This GPU will deliver 1080p performance easily, and with 8GB of memory it's built to last.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £0 There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400 Corsair £39 You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.
POWER SUPPLY		CV Series 550W Corsair £39 You could likely make do with less wattage, but Nvidia recommends a 550W PSU for the RTX 3050, so let's be safe.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,500

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,501

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB Corsair £290 A new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. The Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB is blisteringly quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

She slices,
she dices.



“The best invasions are ones where you’re greeted by a friendly crate”

Breaking conventions as an invader in **ELDEN RING**

I’m an invader. The nuisance who drops into games to wreak havoc on folks just trying to overcome challenges. About halfway through my first playthrough I realised I might like fighting other players more than bosses, and the easiest way to do that is by being a pain in the ass. Except, well, lately my invasions have gotten a bit weird.

It all started, as many things do, with fashion. Deep underground in the Ainsel River lies the Eternal City Nokstella – and when I first set eyes on the ten-foot tall swordswomen that reside there, I knew I had to get their fit. But once my cosplay was assembled, I had another thought: what if I invaded people here, lurking in the depths of the city as a kind of player controlled mini-boss?

NAT CLAYTON



THIS MONTH
Became a mercenary-for-hire in *The Lands Between*.

ALSO PLAYED
Apex Legends

So, for the next few days, that’s what I did. I stalked the corridors and stairwells of Nokstella with my NPC comrades, cutting down intruders about as often as I was cut down by pesky overpowered wizard builds. But sometimes, you’d come across less, well, aggressive players.

See, *Elden Ring* gives you a whole load of tools to mess around. Mimic Veils that let you disguise as props, gestures for communicating all manner of intent. Yes, most of the time you’ll be summoned straight into a hunt – but the best invasions

are the ones where you’re greeted by a friendly crate and spinning trees.

TURNCOAT

Eventually, I would leave the depths, taking my hunt to the cold northern wastes of The Lands Between. It was here where things started to get truly weird – my blade pulled into everything from futile punch-ups to the brilliant realisation that the mimic library up here contained a spectral deer, leading to outrageous, impromptu herds of ghostly babes gliding across the snow.

But the wildest night, by far, came when I invaded a battle already in

I STALKED THE CORRIDORS OF NOKSTELLA WITH MY NPC COMRADES



progress. Our two targets are perched up on a rock firing spells and arrows at another invader, so I take a seat and watch. In between firing flaming bolts of madness out his eyes, one of the targets takes note, and we give each other the universal sign of friendship in games – wiggling our characters and spamming crouch.

Once our less hospitable invader was dealt with, the real fun began. See, one of them had used an item called Taunter's Tongue, which allows an extra invader to enter the game. And so, the game would keep pulling in new invaders – invaders who, more often than not, weren't here to faff around playing prop hunt.

However, as an invader, you can also target and attack other invaders. So when a fresh invader arrived, ready for a 2v2 (or, at best, 2v1v1), I'd turn around and tilt the odds in the defender's favour. But here's the best bit – after every felled invader, we'd cheer and they'd drop me runes, so many that by the night's end I was up 300,000. By my metrics, that's a win.

Invasions are fundamentally hostile acts. But if *Souls* games are about overcoming hardship, who's to say there's anything wrong with putting down the swords and turning an enemy into an ally? ■



Wonderlands also ditches vehicles – I didn't even notice they were gone at first.

“A fresh, Pandora-less path”

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS is a pleasing surprise

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Fired a lot of magical, electric birds out of my hands.

ALSO PLAYED
Elden Ring,
XCOM 2: War of the Chosen

Headling into *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands*, I expected a pretty throwaway spin-off of a series past its prime.

In the wake of *Borderlands 3*, the formula seemed worn out, both the jokes and the looter-shooting feeling tired and old-fashioned. The surprising thing is not just that *Wonderlands* is a blast, but how refreshing certain key changes are.

The biggest switch is the setting. *Wonderlands* moves the action to the faux-fantasy world of Tina's D&D campaign – and, despite the inclusion of guns, the game does mostly leave Pandora behind. You meet new characters, fight new enemies, and explore new locations. I had visions of encountering magic Skags and Ye Olde Psychos, but it feels like a pretty clean break.

It's surprising how much of a relief it is to have the series' style and gameplay divorced from all the baggage of Pandora itself. I didn't realise how sick I was of Vault Keys and Hyperion until it was all taken away. And the more consciously paper-thin world on Tina's tabletop really feels like a better fit for the

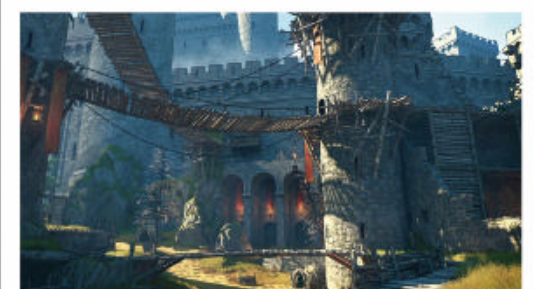
series' sense of humour, the writers able to have fun without worrying about sci-fi world-building.

CHARISMA CHECK

Not every joke lands perfectly, but it feels like less of a barrage – funny lines are given the space to work, instead of being buried under 20 references to old memes. And the tighter focus, riffing on tabletop gaming and Tina's on idiosyncrasies, is a strength, giving the humour a clearer throughline, sharper than the usual scattershot approach.

In combat, magic ratchets up the chaos to what feels like a new sweet spot. Grenades are replaced by a whole swathe of randomised spells, class abilities are stranger than ever, and the selection of gun abilities feels endlessly wild. They still haven't tightened up the shooting, but by leaning hard into the zaniness, they make *Borderlands'* core identity feel newly relevant.

For the first time in a long time I feel excited about the future of the series again. But what I want now is a *Borderlands* bold enough to shed all the fluff, running gags, and charmless characters, and commit to a fresh, Pandora-less path. ■



“I forgot how fun sneaking around is when you’re not packing eight guns”

Sneaking around a classic in **SPLINTER CELL**

I miss when stealth games were dark. Like literally dark, as in the only way to see where you’re going is to flip on a light switch or slip on some night vision goggles. I realised how under-appreciated darkness is recently, during my first go at the original *Splinter Cell*.

And wow, I’m glad to finally be here. It took me a while to acclimate to its hardline ‘every guard alerted at once’ stealth rules and nonexistent checkpoints, but once I learned to hammer F5 to save constantly, *Splinter Cell*’s movement puzzles finally clicked and I started to feel cooler as Sam Fisher than I ever have as Solid Snake or Corvo Attano. And I think the game’s shadows have everything to do with it.

Decades later, the use of darkness is still a stroke of genius. When Sam saunters into a shadow, he almost completely disappears. Shadows get so dark that I can actually believe a guard could breeze right by Sam without knowing he’s there. I can barely see him, and I’m the one controlling him!

▶ MORGAN PARK



THIS MONTH
Spread my legs on a wall and shot some baddies.

ALSO PLAYED
Portal 2

SHADOW WARRIOR

It’s so simple, but *Splinter Cell*’s shadows fly in the face of modern stealth games where a level set in the middle of the night is still bright enough to see perfectly.

In fact, not seeing is core to the challenge of the game. Guards are just as invisible as Sam in darkness, and you can’t tag them through walls like in the later games. The game forces you to slip on the night-vision goggles to keep track of surroundings, but even this isn’t a perfect view. The green filter washes out the contrast of shadows on the ground, making it

SPLINTER CELL IS WAY MORE FUN WHEN I’M PASSING BY GUARDS UNNOTICED

easy to accidentally step out of safety and get spotted.

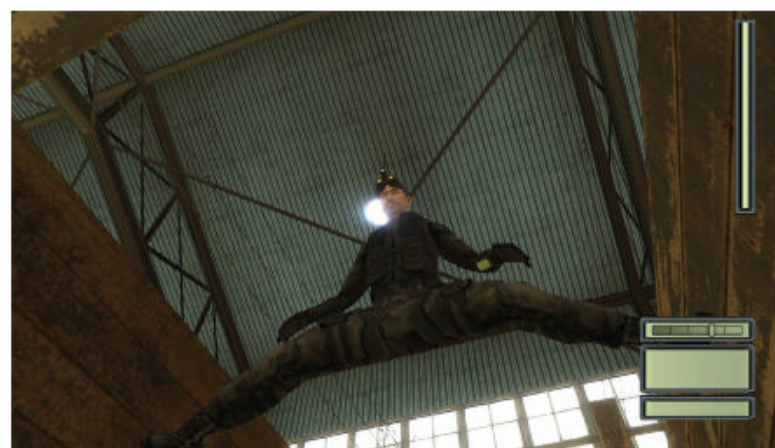
I forgot how fun sneaking around is when you’re not packing eight guns that can instakill everyone around you. Instead, you have two guns that are better at turning off lights than turning off humans. The silenced pistol you start the game with is so bad, in fact, that it’s common to aim straight at an enemy head and miss completely, kicking off a firefight that either ends in a flurry of random bullets or, more commonly, hitting F8 to reload to where it all went wrong.

That’s OK though, because *Splinter Cell* is way more fun when I’m passing by guards completely unnoticed or listening to them talk about the weather in a split-leg foothold above them. Having the option to tear through modern stealth games guns blazing is nice, but *Splinter Cell* is one of the only series that really puts your back against a wall. I really hope Ubisoft’s upcoming remake doesn’t change up this formula too much. *Splinter Cell* would suddenly be a very different game if Sam could fight off three dudes at once or, god forbid, the guns were actually good. ■



FAR LEFT: I don’t know what to call this early 2000s aesthetic other than ‘good’.

LEFT: Believe it or not, Sam Fisher is in this screenshot.





“The old ‘see that mountain? You can go there’ adage has new meaning”

DEATH STRANDING DIRECTOR'S CUT is a great journey, but Kojima only wants the destination

I'm often in two minds about the games of Hideo Kojima. He's great at delivering novel ideas with a pretty frequent hit rate. The sniper battle with the End from *Metal Gear Solid 3* or the scene where Psycho Mantis reads your memory card? Great stuff. But hour long cutscenes filled with dreadful dialogue? A habit of objectifying women of his games? The worst.

Death Stranding represents the highest peaks and deepest depths in terms of quality. The same overblown story and overlong cutscenes intrude in a game which otherwise excels at communicating such a strong sense of place. Ropey combat and stealth feel like a hangover from *Metal Gear Solid V*, mechanics that Kojima just hadn't worked out of his system despite how out of place they feel.

But damn, that hiking! 'Walking simulator' is usually a mocking moniker for narrative focused titles, but if it's taken, and Kojima can put to rest the whole 'Strand Game'

SAMANTHA GREER



THIS MONTH
Fell down a mountain, but stylishly.

ALSO PLAYED
Elden Ring,
more *Elden Ring*

nonsense, then *Death Stranding* should be called a hiking simulator. As delivery boy Sam Porter Bridges you have to carry packages across Iceland-pretending-to-be-an-American-wasteland, placing cargo on Sam's body, stacking it on his backpack and shoulders to get the balance just right. Then you have to march across rocky terrain and hills, wade through rivers, and rappel into canyons, while making sure not to be knocked off balance by snags or harsh currents.

AS DELIVERY BOY SAM PORTER BRIDGES YOU HAVE TO CARRY PACKAGES

BRIDGE TOO FAR

When the game is just this, it is bliss. A melancholy journey where the very act of walking is made engrossing and challenging. The old 'see that mountain? You can go there' adage has new meaning in a context where travel is itself the obstacle. Coming to a chasm and having to go step by step, dismantling my sled, piling extra packages onto Sam's back, and lowering myself down is every bit as compelling as any boss fight. Couple that with a great soundtrack and spooky encounters, and traversing *Death Stranding's* world is one of my favourite gaming experiences.

The game is at its best when it's all about the journey, and everything Kojima adds in the new *Director's Cut* release seems centred around minimising that down to feeling like a quick taxi ride. A bizarre misunderstanding of the beautiful thing they've built.

It's the videogame equivalent of the Star Wars remasters, adding noise to something until the original is hidden under bloat and excess. ■



VALORANT

Riot's shooter continues to evolve with its community. *By Imogen Mellor*



Valorant's influence grows under Riot's steady development. The dev has been refining and tweaking the game since its 2020 release, dedicated to finding an almost impossible perfect balance between its agents, guns, and maps. It's just as important for players to be checking the patch notes regularly as it is to put the hours into practicing their headshots.

The latest 4.05 update made changes to 'Brimmy with the stimmy'. Brimstone is one of the game's original cast and has been, for a long time, a staple agent. Using remote-deployable smokes and his incendiary grenades he's almost always been a great mover and shaker, despite some blips where other agents outperformed him.

Now he's been nerfed, however, and his stim beacon has taken a hit. This ability allows him to place a gadget on the ground which increases rate of fire, movement speed and more in an area. Very handy, but too handy. To encourage players having a more considered approach of when to use it tactically, Riot has made it more expensive, and only given the player one use of the ability each round. That's quite a nerf.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 22, 2022

DEVELOPER
Riot Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
playvalorant.com

But that's part of the development philosophy. There are gaming communities that envy the updates that *Valorant* and *League of Legends* get as, although they're rarely perfect, they show that the team is always there, watching, waiting, and taking notes on your matches. Complaints and issues the community have will at least get a reaction from the team in due course. It may be a while, and fixes may need even more fixes, but Riot will keep tweaking.

ACTING OUT

With the 4.04 patch came Episode 4 Act II. The battle pass and new agents system is split into Episodes and Acts. Episodes last six months, and contain three Acts each. It splits up competitive play, and each adds new agents, lore, and gorgeous cinematics to boot.

With Episode 4 Act II came large rebalances of many of *Valorant's* cast, from Astra to Yoru. The latter, Yoru, has constantly struggled to find his place, crowded out by the abilities of others. He's needed a full rework

almost since his initial release.

Valorant is all about information detection and denial, and Yoru's skill set wasn't up to scratch to keep up with the abilities of other agents. Riot has tried to change that, making his abilities more disruptive.

Yoru's Fakeout ability used to send footsteps out from the player, attempting to confuse an enemy team. Players got used to the idea quickly, and so now Riot has updated this ability to a full copy of Yoru instead. This baits players into shooting at the decoy and revealing their position to the other team.

Map updates make massive differences. *Valorant's* 5v5 gameplay is set on just seven maps and players



IT MAY BE A WHILE, BUT RIOT WILL KEEP TWEAKING

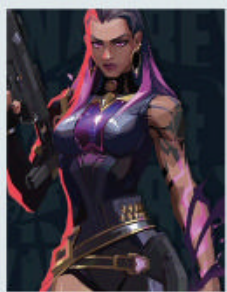
know them intimately. With the community's millions of hours of gameplay, positions and plays get known for their difficulty. Maps may be considered heavily attack weighted, or some defensive points become difficult to bypass. Big updates allow changes that may seem small to a casual player, but can completely change the meta for longtime fans. The map Icebox has had doorway shifts, shipping containers rotated, and more so that different agents can feel at home in its icy domain, changing what players consider good pushing and planting tactics.

Even unpopular updates cause a rotation of good and bad agents by players' standards. Astra, for example, was a must-play for a team's success and now she's been nerfed hard. But really, the positive aspect of these changes is that it keeps the meta fresh. The pain is outweighed by a resurgence in creativity. New metas have to evolve and new plans have to be made. It's kept the community talking and reworking their tactics, once again on their toes.

Valorant relies on constant updates to work and maintain player interest. That doesn't mean the community aren't complaining about Jett's continued rule over Duelists, or sceptical of Riot's anti-cheat's effectiveness, but they're interested. And *Valorant* continues to thrive. ■

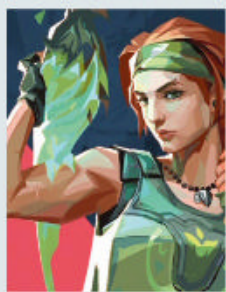
YOU'RE LOOKING RADIANT

The staple elements of an agent's wardrobe



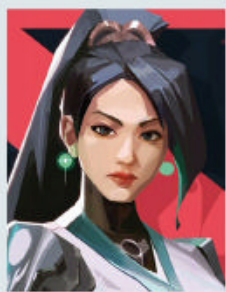
STRAPS AND BELTS

They serve no purpose but you look cooler, and that's what matters.



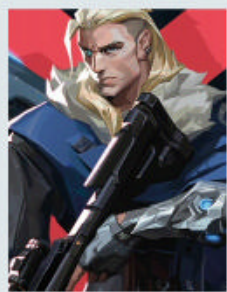
GOOD BICEPS

You're hauling big, heavy guns around with you all day – of course your arms look good.



GREAT HAIR

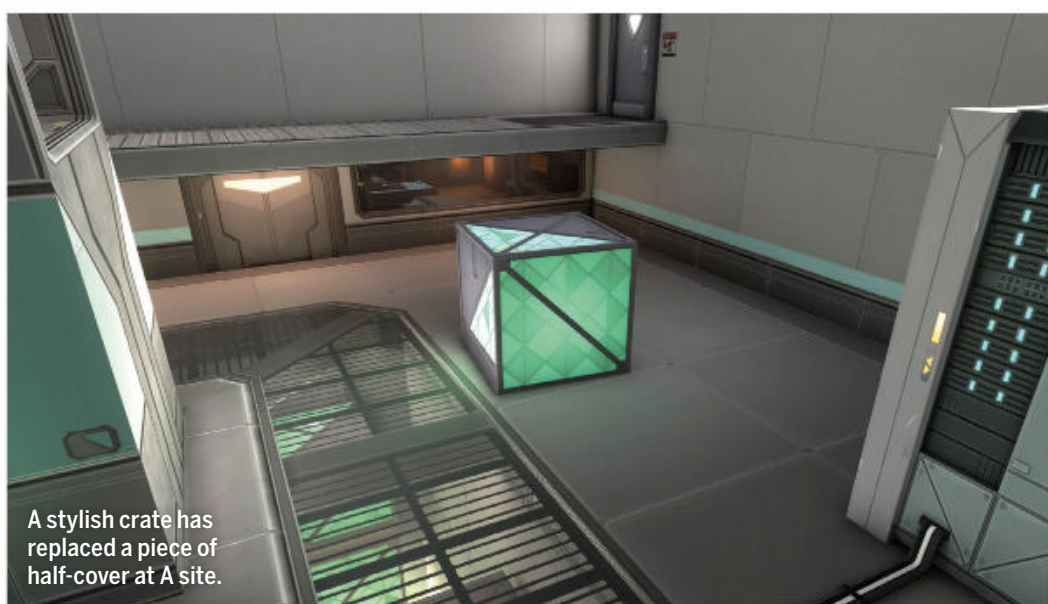
Unless you're a robot, you have to have a fresh trim for the battlefield. That's the rule.



FINGERLESS GLOVES

There are more sets of fingerless gloves here than a crap emo band gig in 2008.

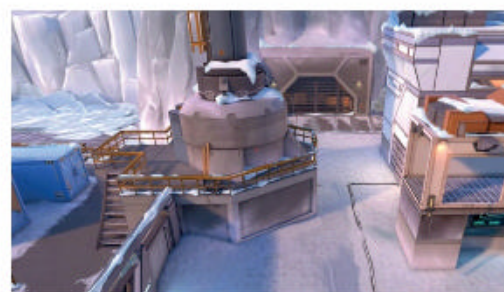
Some map changes seem subtle, but make a big difference in play.



A stylish crate has replaced a piece of half-cover at A site.



LEFT: Changes should make the map more intuitive, with less odd tactics needing to be used in high-level play.



BELOW LEFT: Some adjustments to spacing make smoke more viable.



Overall, the changes make Icebox a bit less frosty for attackers.



TOP: Add new sorceries with some stellar effects.

RIGHT: Who doesn't love a parade?



Photo mode lets you get up close and make new friends.

ELDEN RING

Praise the mod. *By Christopher Livingston*

Elden Ring is huge, and I'm not just talking about the size of its map. The open world action RPG is a massive hit, not only selling millions of copies but launching to near universal critical acclaim. We love it, and pretty much everyone else does, too. It's a fantastic and challenging game set in a mysterious open world.

But just because a game is a widely beloved masterpiece doesn't mean there isn't room to tinker with it a bit. Immediately after its release in February, mods for *Elden Ring* started popping up – at first it was mostly reshades, post-processing injectors to subtly change the visual tone of the game, but it wasn't long before bigger and more complicated mods started arriving to adjust the difficulty (in both directions), add new weapons, clothing, armour, and other items, change the HUD, overhaul the magic system, and more.

One of the best mods for *Elden Ring* adds something lots of players were clamouring for: a photo mode. The Lands Between is a vast, beautiful world filled with stunning sights and bizarre creatures, and it's hard to take it all in while fighting for your life or galloping around at breakneck speed. Not to mention the impossibility of getting one of the intricately designed bosses to stand still long enough to grab a selfie or two before it pounds you to dust.

SAY CHEESE

The *Elden Ring Photomode* mod, created by Frans 'Otis_Inf' Bouma, is perfect for any Tarnished that's looking to moonlight as a wildlife photographer. When the mod is activated you can play the game just as you normally would, but a simple keystroke will switch on camera

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 24, 2022

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
bit.ly/3tXEKts

mode. Controls let you zoom way, way out until your character is just a tiny figure on the screen, perfect for capturing dramatic vistas and highlighting the vastness of the Lands Between. Another key can completely hide the UI so there's nothing on the screen but the gorgeous visuals. You



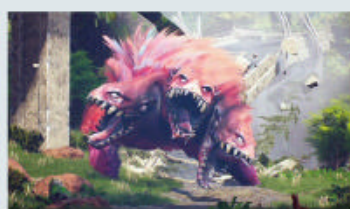
A SIMPLE KEYSTROKE WILL SWITCH ON CAMERA MODE

can set up camera paths to shoot some dramatic video along with your photos, use a timestop feature to pause everything while you fly your camera around or set up a shot, and there are lots of other features to create postcard-esque photos of the game, perfect for some desktop backgrounds so you can stare at *Elden Ring* even when you're not playing it.

My favourite feature of the photo mode is a tickbox that makes enemies ignore you. Your character is still on screen but to enemy eyes you are completely invisible. That means you can run right up to any enemy or boss and take the perfect selfie without them going ham on you. Not only does that make for some fantastic photo ops, but you can safely wander and explore the world with no fear of sudden death, and you can really examine and appreciate the finer details and animations of the creatures that are usually trying to kill you.

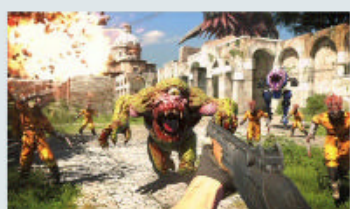
MAD WORLD

Other wide, weird worlds you should visit



BIOMUTANT

An apocalyptic kung-fu fable featuring a bipedal mutant cat that can summon a ball of mucus.



SERIOUS SAM 4

Visiting Russia, Italy, and France sounds like a great vacation. Except for all the freaky aliens.



SAINTS ROW 4

Kill people with sex toys, Inflato-Rays, and weaponised guitar cases.



WEST OF LOATHING

Evil cows, ghost pickles, and a meat-based economy. The west was never this wild.

>> I had a strangely enjoyable time in *Elden Ring* just acting like I was a citizen of the world. I picked up a torch and followed along behind one of those zombie processions. I wandered around the swamp and looked at those horrifying crabs up close. I spent some time in Caelid watching those giant crows pecking at corpses and poking my head into caves without being eviscerated by whatever was hiding inside. I rode my horse right alongside the imposing Tree Sentinel, acting like I was a Junior Sentinel in training. Clearly this isn't the way you're meant to play *Elden Ring*, but it's a wonderful chance to appreciate the dark beauty of the world and its inhabitants without anyone having to die an inglorious death.

TAKE IT EASY

Being invisible to enemy eyes is about the easiest mode you could ask for, but there is a legitimate easy mode mod if you're finding *Elden Ring* a bit too difficult for your tastes. The mod is called, aptly enough, *Easy Mode for Elden Ring*, created by modder odashikonbu, and it has several different difficulty options to choose from depending on what you're looking for. The first version is simple enough: it reduces enemy attack damage by 50%, and makes your own attacks 25% more deadly. The second version adds a bit more help for struggling Tarnished, using those same damage and attack multipliers while also increasing the amount of runes earned by a factor of ten, and doubling the healing of the Crimson and Cerulean Tears.

And finally, if you really want to remove a lot of the difficulty baked into *Elden Ring*, the third version of the *Easy Mode* mod does even more to swing the odds into your favour. It adds ten to every starting attribute, lets you craft items without needing to gather the required materials, removes the focus point costs for magic and the weight from weapons and armour, and does a lot more to make *Elden Ring* much easier to battle your way through.

Not everyone is looking to make *Elden Ring* easier, though. If you're looking for more of a challenge (I know plenty of players are gluttons for punishment) try the *Prepare to Die (Hard Mode)* mod by Silentverge02, which the modder describes as "extremely difficult but fair". The mod is a revamp of enemy

AI and stats, so it does more than just increase enemy attack damage. The hit points of enemies have a 1.5x multiplier, their stamina is increased by 1.25x, and their senses have been improved. Now enemies will detect you from further away, they'll spend a greater amount of time looking for you, and once they've spotted you they'll chase you for longer distances before giving up. Their hearing has improved a lot as well – if you try creeping up behind someone for an easy backstab, you'll need to be quick about it because they'll hear you when you get right up behind them. Even activities like smashing boxes or other bits of scenery will alert enemies from a good distance away and send them to investigate the noise. Keep quiet, Tarnished!

One of the more startling changes is to the Sites of Grace, which function as fast-travel points in vanilla *Elden Ring*. Say goodbye to most of that convenience – in the mod you can only fast-travel to churches and cathedrals, which means much more traditional travel and more time spent crisscrossing the world with enemies on your tail. But it's not all designed to be punishing, it's also meant to be more realistic. Yes, enemies can see you from further away, but at night, or if you're hidden in darkness, they'll have a harder time spotting you. Bows are now more useful with twice the range as in the vanilla

version, so they're viable choices for ranged combat or good for distractions – if you aim at a wall, the arrow will make a noise when it strikes, which can distract the enemy.

SPELL CHECK

If you're a magic user in *Elden Ring*, this next mod should be of interest. *Magic Overhaul – Sorceries* by Tellah9 creates some new spells for you to

MAGMA BURST CREATES A HUGE EXPLOSION OF LAVA

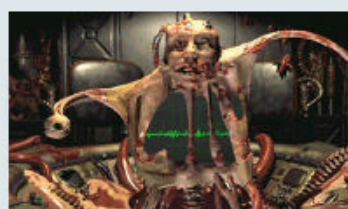
use based on existing spells from the game, giving your staff a whole bunch of exciting new options. Stars of Ruin, for example, lets you send a swarm of projectiles at an enemy, but the mod adds a sorcery called Founding Rain of Stars that creates a dark cloud above the enemy, then rains projectiles down upon them like a targeted storm. A sorcery called Blizzard functions a bit like the vanilla Freezing Mist, creating an icy cyclone at the target's position. If you prefer something hotter, Magma Burst creates a huge explosion of lava that engulfs your opponent.

If you're not looking for major changes to *Elden Ring*, you might still be interested in a few new weapons or skins, and there are plenty of mods that add some. Like, say, maybe just replacing the fearsome Tree Sentinel's horse with Thomas the Tank Engine? In what has become a modding tradition, the storybook train can be imported into *Elden Ring* with the *Tree Sentinel Thomas* mod by skymoon. If that feels like a bit much, how about some new swords? *The Master Sword* mod by MrMorritos3D lets you swing around Link's famous blade from the *Zelda* series, which replaces *Elden Ring*'s usual uchigatana.

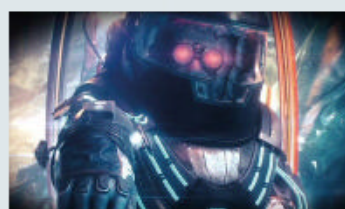
To use the mods listed above, keep in mind that you'll have to play *Elden Ring* in offline mode – if the game detects mods it won't let you play online, and there's always the possibility of a ban if you do. A few of the mods require a file that disables *Elden Ring*'s anticheat, too, so tread carefully, backup your game files, read each mod's instructions carefully, and don't ever try to use these mods in online mode. ■

LIKE A BOSS

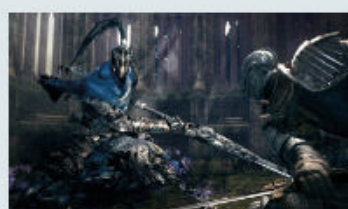
Our favourite scary bosses



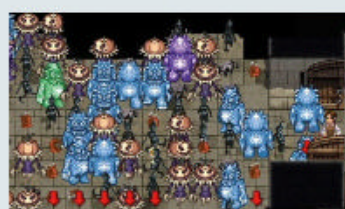
FALLOUT THE MASTER
The neat thing is, you don't have to fight him. With high charisma you can talk him to death.



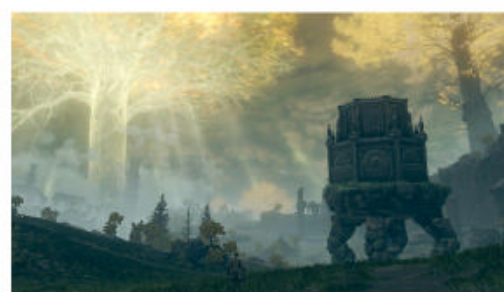
ARKHAM CITY MR FREEZE
Batman's tricks only work one time each, so Freeze constantly makes you try new strategies.



ARTOTIAS DARK SOULS
Not the slow, lumbering bosses you're used to. He's fast, nimble, and fights like the player does.

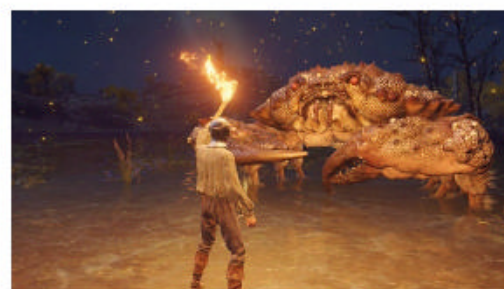


DUNGEONS OF DREDMOR MONSTER ZOO
Not sure if a room can be called a boss, but this one comes close.



ABOVE: No enemy AI means I can patrol with my pal.

LEFT: Zoom out with camera controls. Way, way out.



Selfies with the boss. Always a morale booster.



GET STARTED WITH THE SOULS SERIES

Trying your first FromSoft adventure? Here's how to survive. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

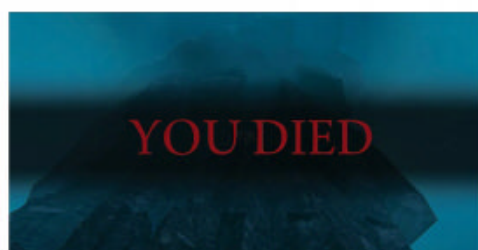
TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Guide hub:
bit.ly/3tZdd01

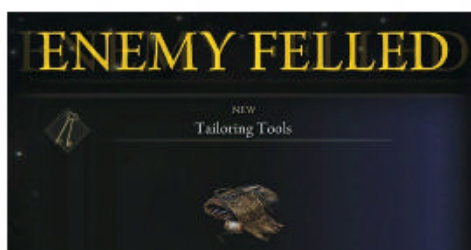
Missable NPCs:
bit.ly/35XBU4U

Best items:
bit.ly/3JfN43w



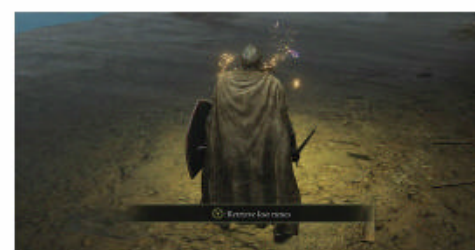
PREPARE TO DIE

1 If *Elden Ring* is the first 'Soulsborne' game you're trying (named for *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*), know that you're in for a difficult, special, and fascinating adventure. To catch you up, we've got some general tips that might not be so clear to beginners.



LESSON LEARNED

2 Dying isn't a punishment in *Souls* games, but an opportunity for you to improve. The harsh world and brutal bosses of *Elden Ring* are a puzzle to be solved and, with each death, you'll be closer to a solution.



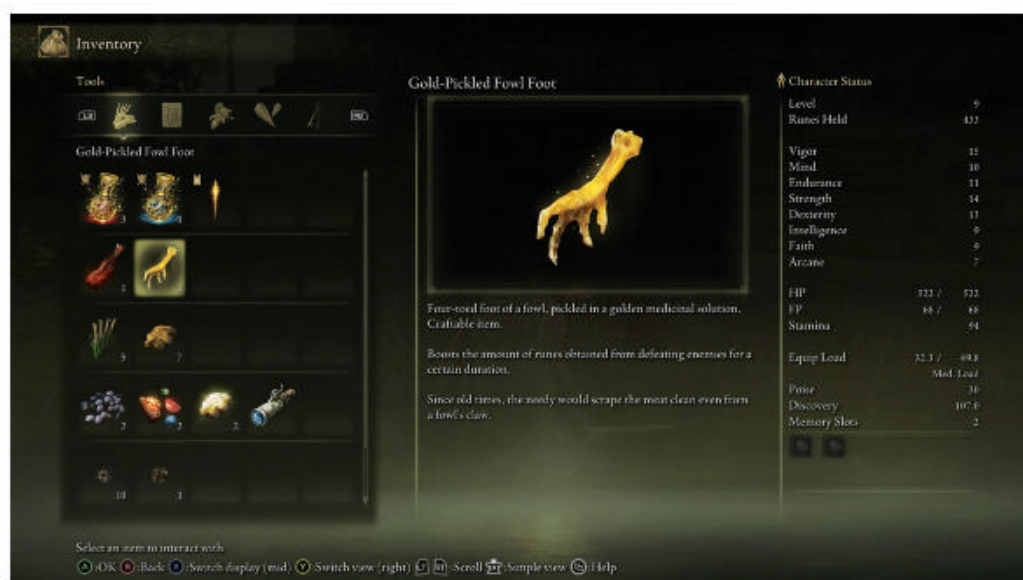
RISK VS REWARD

3 You'll drop your currency on death, and it'll disappear forever if you die again before reclaiming it. If you have a lot, use it to level up or buy items. There's no shame in running past enemies to recover your points, either.



JUST CHATTING

4 When you come across NPCs in the world, trigger their dialogue until they stop saying something new: sometimes you'll get extra detail or even gear. Also, don't trust any of them, especially if they go by the name of Patches.



STORY FRAGMENTS

5 Get in the habit of reading the descriptions of everything you pick up. Not only is this one of the key ways of piecing together the story of FromSoft's games, they may also give you important boss-battling clues.



BOX OF TRICKS

6 *Elden Ring* will have fun with you, so watch out for trick chests with surprising consequences. As with the player-eating Mimics from *Dark Souls*, prepare to find more than just some gear and items inside an appealing chest.



ODD JOBS

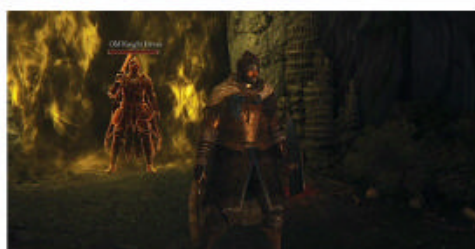
7 *Souls* games have quests, but not in the traditional sense. You'll follow the whims of NPCs and make choices, but you'll have no obvious objectives or quest log, and it won't be obvious if you've failed one. Pay attention and tread carefully.

BREATHE EASY *Manage your stamina against Elden Ring's many nasties*



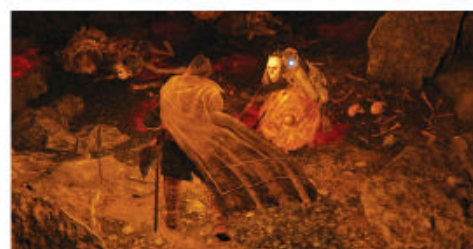
HERE, TRY MESSAGE

8 *Souls* games are mostly played solo, but overcome as a community. If you're online, blood spots will warn you how another player died near you and you'll find written messages that could be a warning, hint, or practical joke.



I NEED BACKUP

9 That's not all the help you can get, either. You'll also be able to summon NPC and player-controlled companions to fight alongside you. Equally, watch out for hostile players and NPCs that may invade your world in certain situations.



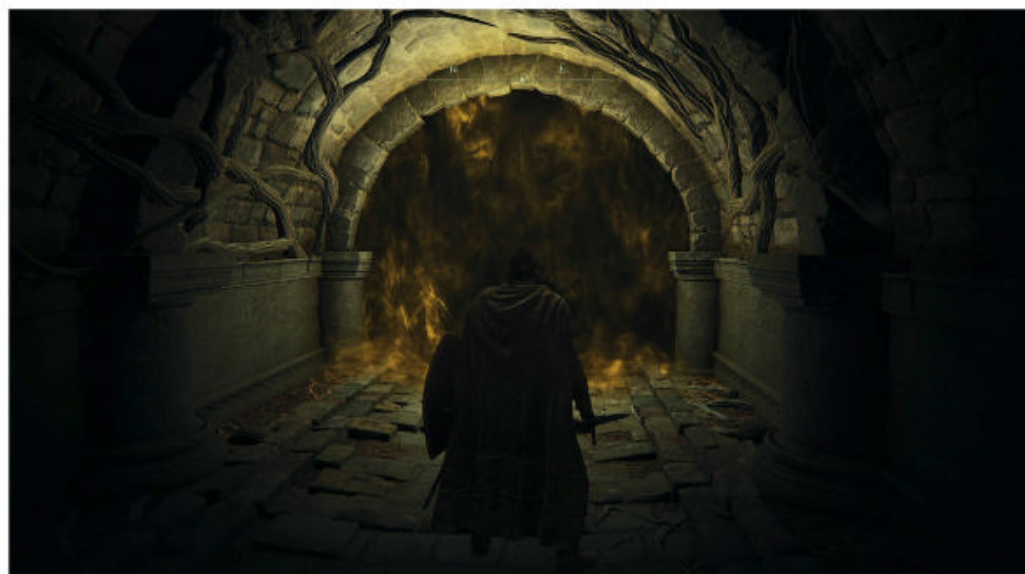
EN GARDE!

10 Performing combat moves like the riposte and backstab will give you invulnerability while you're doing them. If you're fighting a group of enemies, target a staggered foe and use these actions to keep yourself briefly protected and push others back.



SECRET ESCAPES

11 Watch out for fake walls. With a simple swipe of a sword they'll fade away to reveal a hidden passageway and loot. They are virtually impossible to spot but player messages can point you in the direction, or trick you into looking a bit silly as you hit a solid wall.



FOG OF WAR

12 If you see a doorway shrouded in fog or mist, there's a good chance you'll be fighting a boss on the other side. This isn't always the case, but it's certainly worth staying alert if you choose to step through it.



BRINGING COMMON SENSE TO DEMOCRACY 4

How the application of family values and strong leadership made me the most popular leader ever. *By Ian Evenden*

Excuse us, this month, for indulging in a diary that takes place in a world of imagination so detached from our present reality as to be almost unthinkable. A parallel universe with almost no links to the lived experience of anyone who will ever read this magazine.

This month, I'm going to be a politician. One who's in it to make his rich friends richer, and isn't against grinding the poor if it keeps foie gras on his table. His policies are good, old-fashioned, common sense – none of this namby-pamby 'kinder, gentler, politics' or political correctness here. Oh no.

All political careers in *Democracy 4* end with failure. You either lose an election and are ejected from power by the will of the people, or crumple to the ground following the crack of an assassin's rifle. It doesn't look much, particularly in a magazine feature that makes such great use of screenshots, but plays out like a modern-day *Crusader Kings* with less pope-eating. At least, I don't think you can eat the pope, but I'll certainly do it if the opportunity presents itself.

Election time, and I've chosen to rule Great Britain. I come to power with a majority of 10%, and inherit a well-functioning health service, low poverty, moderate levels of education and unemployment, and reasonable levels of crime from the corruption-riddled and incompetent previous administration.

My approval level is huge among the poor, the retired and, for some reason, socialists. I'm really unpopular among the church-going community, who must have heard about the pope thing, but this is more than balanced out by my enormous popularity among environmentalists. Did I make green promises during my election campaign? Maybe, but they're more like guidelines anyway. Yes, it all looks positively utopian out here on Airstrip One. Let's break stuff.

Some circles on the game's main screen represent your policies, which you can shift, and others represent more

abstract concepts, such as GDP or respiratory disease. Green icons mean something is going well, and red means things are not so peachy. Lines between icons convey a map of influences and relationships, with arrows on the line moving faster when there's a stronger relationship. This latter subtlety isn't going to come across well in print, so you'll just have to take my word for it.

FAT CHANCE

Where to begin? Obesity! Bright red in the bottom left of the screen, this seems like something I could sort out for an easy, vote-winning victory. Its lines of influence come from areas such as health policy (big, complicated, scary)

MY APPROVAL LEVEL IS HUGE AMONG THE POOR, THE RETIRED, AND SOCIALISTS

and smaller things like car usage, which we're all for; food standards and labelling, which we're against (unnecessary red tape); and compulsory school sports, which are character building. I didn't get where I am today without being forced to run miles in the rain by a sadistic games master then involuntarily showered down afterwards.

Eventually I settle on free school meals as the cause of the obesity epidemic, because they're a really easy target mainly used by the poor, who love me, and cutting them saves me money. So bam! Funding slashed. Personal responsibility reinforced. State interference curbed. Heh heh heh oh yeah, this feels good.

Also in red on the other side of the screen is the competitiveness of our economy. The lazy workers, it seems, are too busy worrying about what they're paid and not about the value they're producing for their bosses and their shareholders. I suspect that if they had more of their money taken from them in taxes then they might value it more, so shift the tax burden away from corporate taxes

and onto personal taxation. This will be a new age of personal responsibility, and if the workers want a low-tax, high wage economy, they're damned well going to have to work for it. There are no free rides here. Unless you're a CEO who worked hard for their inherited wealth, of course.

Finally, in order to promote foreign investment into the country, I gut competition law. Democracy uses a system of 'political capital' to decide how many things you can do, rather like action points in an RPG, with the size of the individual changes limited by the effectiveness of your ministers. If you've got enough capital and a highly effective cabinet, you can do anything, but ending up stranded without either makes you useless as a leader. I've run out for this cycle, so it's time for the quarterly report.

Prison overcrowding is, the report says, a big problem. What could be the common sense solution? I could

THE RULES

1. Old-fashioned common sense policies.

2. A return to personal responsibility.

3. Rules apply to other people, not me.



The poor. It's not hard to have had an ancestor on the right side of the civil war, you know.



» invest in social measures to reduce crime, or build more prisons (including private ones run for profit), increase sentences as a deterrent, and investigate bringing back the death penalty. Decisions, decisions...

LOYAL FAMILY

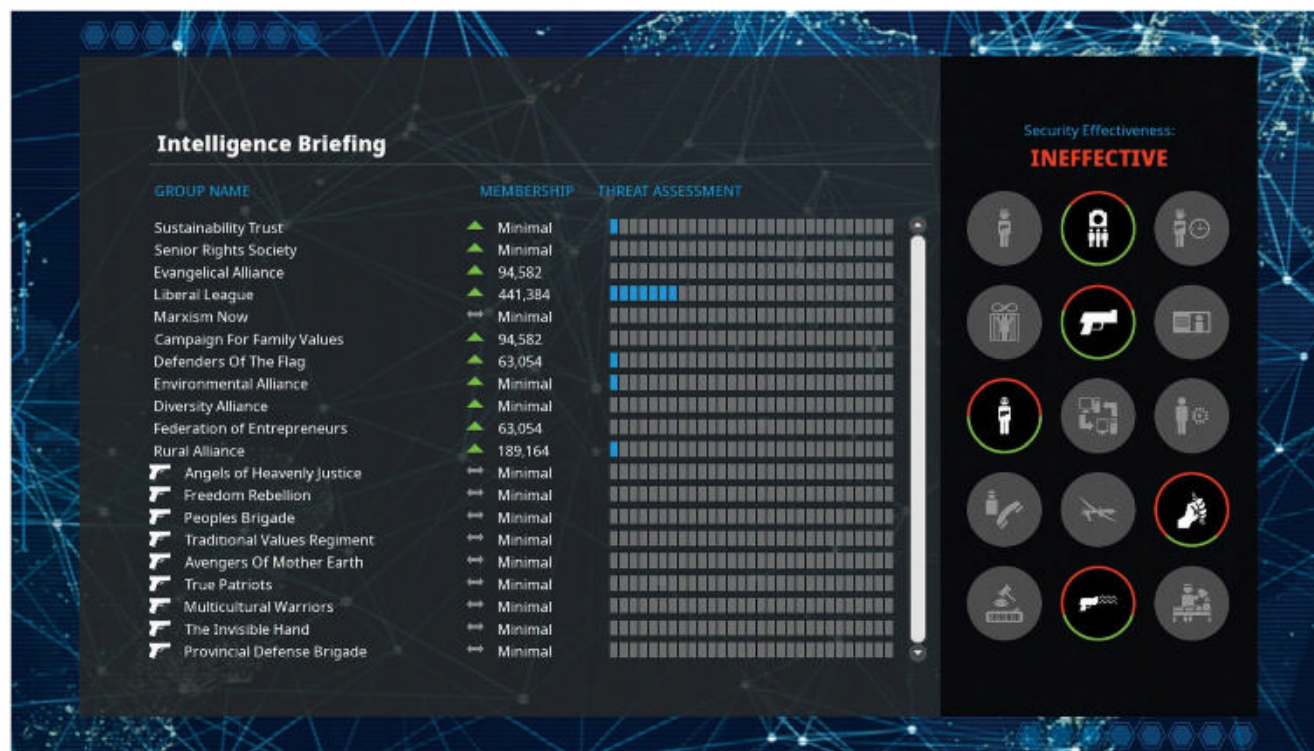
The game thinks it's being funny, but during a loading screen it briefly flashes up the words 'Giving jobs to family members' and, well, that's exactly what I would do if I could. What I can do, however, is to give jobs to those who are the most loyal, so it's time for a cabinet reshuffle. I'm not a complete clown, so jobs go to those with the aptitude for them, but loyalty is the deciding factor rather than effectiveness. This has the curious effect of increasing my political capital, so it was clearly the right decision to make.

There's a lot of red on the board now, as my budget cuts and slashing of red tape begins to bear fruit, but one very green circle remains – food standards. I have enough capital after my reshuffle to cut it to minimal funding, so I do it, and farmers and consumers all over the country rejoice. Clearly time for a party. Later, there are calls for me to pass a positive discrimination law, which sadly doesn't mean all the plum jobs going to my mates. I'm not having this, the market can decide. Rejected.

Security briefing time! I always like this, as it's an opportunity to dress up as a police officer and pretend the laws apply to everyone. It seems that some group called the Liberal League is encouraging people to oppose me. Can that be right? Not very liberal of them. Clearly a load of extra funding into security services and surveillance is what's required. I'll get the money from the community policing budget. Also, I'm going to regulate social media, as that's where the young people of the Liberal League are probably swapping their seditious ideas. I also chuck some money at cycling initiatives, to please those environmentalists who provide a chunk of my funding, but do nothing to reduce car use, as motorists also send lots of cash my way.

A global recession isn't making things any easier, and then one of my major donors quits as I'm not being conservative enough. However, I am perceived as trustworthy, a strong leader, and compassionate. Then Argentina plants a flag on the Falkland Islands

BELOW: My intelligence services are ineffective, so people need to take responsibility for their own protection.



TOP TRUMPS

Why I couldn't have lost



ALL OF THESE ROSE DURING MY TENURE

Tourism, demand for oil, currency strength, private housing, GDP, wages, lifespan, CO2 emissions, corruption, average temperature, healthcare demand, tobacco usage, and inflation.

ALL OF THESE FELL DURING MY GLORIOUS RULE

Unemployment, violent crime, cryptocurrency adoption, oil price, immigration, international trade, environmental standards, earnings among the middle and lower classes, business confidence, foreign relations, foreign investment, overall health, and democracy itself.

(obviously British – just look at a map) and I lose 20 'strong leader' points. Time for a media stunt. Doing judo with the SAS seems a bit risky, so I decide to be photographed while windsurfing. And it's a huge success. I am strong leader, hear me roar.

FOCUS GROUP

I quickly use my popularity to implement policies to cut immigration by 10%, put tariffs on imports, and remove the Unexplained Wealth Orders that were making life so hard for some of my richer citizens. GDP has risen by 12% since I was elected, and the budget deficit falls every year. I am a huge success – 39% of poll respondents and 57% of focus groups agree. So of course I send troops abroad to secure the oil supply when asked. After all, something must be done. This is something. Therefore, it must be done.

A little later, and things are looking excellent. OK, so schoolchildren are sharing textbooks, I've gutted work safety regulations, and skewed labour laws in favour of employers, and alcohol abuse is on the rise, but we're well on the way to affording an orbital nuclear bombardment facility, and I think you'll agree that's what really matters. Fracking and oil drilling on our home soil are bringing in lots of lovely lolly, and the party has attracted a major new donor. I am intensely relaxed.

An election looms. I should give a speech. I pack it with anti-socialist, anti-trade union rhetoric, damning the poor and praising the rich. And the youth, of course, come in for a particular attack. How dare they? Especially as I've recently U-turned and raised education funding to head off a skills shortage created by my immigration clampdown. I'll fiddle with the tax burden to punish them, see how they like that.

An armed group called the Angels of Heavenly Justice (I recently made it easier to get hold of handguns to head-off rising crime) has come to the attention of my well-funded but poorly performing intelligence services. They're upset about, well, I'm not really sure. They just seem upset in general, but they're more of a threat than the Liberal League



Election time, and my election pledges include cutting income tax by 25%, raising GDP even further, and extra funding to the intelligence services. I have no intention of

Such is the cover-up of my true glorious victory that I am offered only the chance of retirement in obscurity. I am being silenced! Silenced, I tell you. The only conclusion I can possibly come to is that this magazine has a left-wing bias, and its editor is a communist. ■

Policy ideas

- HUMAN RIGHTS
- WE CARE
- HUMANITY
- LAW
- PUBLIC SERVICES
- LAW AND ORDER
- THREATS

- Policy Development Agency
- Legal Communities
- National Judicial Councils
- Special Package: Prisoners
- Rights to Life
- Rights to Privacy
- Rights to Religion
- Working Practices & Procedures
- Anti-Corruption Agency
- Anti-Racket
- Fair Courts
- Non-Homelessness
- Community Courts: America
- Courts
- Death Penalty
- Decisions Without Trial
- High On-Line's Ethical Courts
- Criminal Justice Community
- 10 Courts

Torture Usage By Secret Services

Torture is a key element of a government's security, and its use is a key element of a government's security. It is a key element of a government's security, and its use is a key element of a government's security.

Implementation time: 4 quarters

Estimated costs (Political capital): 40/15

Political Costs: 250.00 Mln - 1720.00 Mln

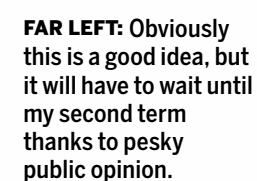
Political Benefits: None

Estimated Popularity (MPS): 70%

Estimated Effects:

Effect	Direction
Foreign Relations	Down
Corruption	Up
Organized Crime	Down
Victims Crime	Up
Corruption	Down
Money Laundering	Up

Investment Capital



PC GAMER 121



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE CITY OF VIZIMA

The first Witcher's big city walked so Novigrad could run. *By Ted Litchfield*



LEFT: This curving avenue abutting Vizima's walls is particularly striking.



The *Witcher 3*'s Novigrad is a defining RPG city: a bustling metropolis on the brink of catastrophe, threatened both by invaders outside its borders and religious zealotry within them. But this wasn't CD Projekt's first portrait of a city on fire.

2007's *The Witcher* is often overlooked in favour of its prettier and better-translated sequels, but the game that first brought CD Projekt to international attention remains a gem, with much of what made those later games special already fully or partially realised. Vizima, the city in which you spend about half the game, is brimming with as much life and character as Novigrad, and foreshadows CD Projekt's later success with designing urban environments.

LOCAL COLOUR

My favourite thing about Vizima is its layout and structure: it is a low, cramped, muddy medieval city with twisting streets and neighbourhoods divided by function, race, and class, with landmarks like the main roads intersecting at St Lebioda's Hospital, the curving path to the Burning Rose barracks, and the large courtyard in front of the New Narakort inn making navigation intuitive.

It's not just the landmarks that stand out either: even the 'filler' buildings you can't enter look different from one another. While taking a tour of my old save file, I was surprised at how every block looked unique. Any reusing of building models to construct the city's layout is well hidden.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE October 26, 2007	DEVELOPER CD Projekt Red
PUBLISHER Atari	LINK bit.ly/3Ju5n50

STREET SMART

Essential RPG cities



NOVIGRAD
The *Witcher 3*'s metropolis plays host to some of the best quests in the whole series, and is contiguous with the massive rural zone of Velen. An all-time great hub for a modern classic.



BALDUR'S GATE
BioWare's signature city set the template for future examples like Novigrad, and the game's rhythm of low-level country adventure giving way to high-level hijinks in the city is reflected in many other RPGs.



SIGIL
There's nothing quite like the City of Doors, the architecturally impossible city at the centre of the universe and primary setting of Black Isle Studios' cult hit, *Planescape: Torment*.



THE IMPERIAL CITY
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion's iconic centrepiece's striking, Grecco-Roman look goes well with its interiors, and it gets props for letting you explore every building.

The shiny seventh console generation graphics are resting on a heavily modified version of the Aurora engine BioWare used to create the original *Neverwinter Nights*, pushed well beyond what you might expect of it based on that 2001 RPG. *The Witcher* has a dynamic time of day system, with NPCs proceeding through their schedules and even realistically responding to the weather – it never gets old seeing

armed and armoured guard patrols, a more well-heeled citizenry, and a dearth of non-human inhabitants. It adds to the texture of the city, building on *The Witcher*'s fiction at every level of the simulation.

Like *The Witcher 3*'s Novigrad under siege, Vizima is an afflicted city, with a virulent plague and tensions between oppressed nonhumans and a fundamentalist religious movement threatening to boil over. In Vizima, Novigrad, and even *The Witcher 2*'s Vergen, CD Projekt has demonstrated a deft hand at making players fall in love with a fictional city, then posing an existential threat to it. It captures the fear and anxiety inherent in one of the great horrors of history: how cities can be shockingly fragile in the face of external threats.

Vizima reaches an ignoble end in *The Witcher 3*: the Nilfgaardian empire conquers the city, and an early sequence sees you tour the royal palace under new management, with craftsmen hacking away at marble reliefs. It's a sad end to the city you spent so much time in, but CD Projekt's loving recreation of the space in a new engine eight years later suggests that the developers recalled Vizima as fondly as I did. ■

MY FAVOURITE THING ABOUT VIZIMA IS ITS LAYOUT AND STRUCTURE

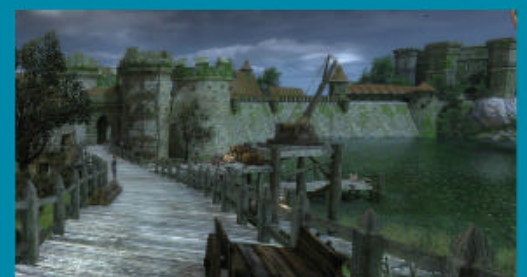
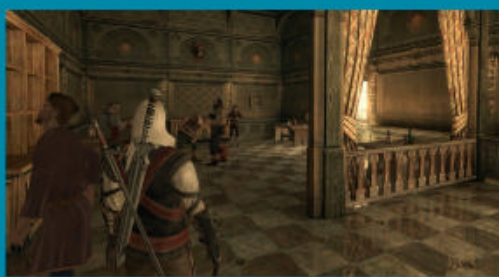
them scurry for cover once it starts raining – adding to the immersion.

ABOUT TOWN

When you first arrive in Vizima during the game's second act, you are restricted to the Temple Quarter, an impoverished neighbourhood home to the city's dwarven and elven populations. Proceeding to Act 3, you're allowed to move freely between the Temple Quarter and the ritzier Trade Quarter. The class distinctions are palpable, with better



RIGHT: A fistfight breaks out at the high class New Narakort inn.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

A burly cover shooter with an infectious central gameplay loop



BINARY DOMAIN

I have wasted years not shooting robots. Time to fix that. *By Matt Elliott*

Have you heard of Sisyphus? I bet you have. He's the lad from Greek mythology who twice cheated death, so Zeus, king of the gods and occasional horny swan, cursed him to repeatedly roll a big rock up a hill for all eternity. Every time he reached the top, down the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would start again. Which is bad. But what if, let's suppose, Sisyphus secretly loved rolling rocks? What if rolling rocks up hills, however repetitive, was as fun as shooting robots in *Binary Domain*? What then, Zeus?

It's perhaps not a question that's troubled classical scholars, but it's relevant here. Because my memory of *Binary Domain* is vague and hallucinatory, like something from a

Michel Gondry music video. I recall a game that scored 70%, lost 5 points for repetition and another 10 for shitty boss battles, then clawed 20 back in hindsight for being a laughable cult classic. But I remembered it wrongly. Actually, the rock-rolling element of *Binary Domain* is simply magnificent. If Zeus cursed me to shoot olive robots in neo-Tokyo for the rest of time, only for a fresh dropship of enemies to arrive at the end of every level, I'd pretend to be sad so he didn't find a more upsetting punishment.

The base game of *Binary Domain* is deeply satisfying – a burly, competent cover shooter with an infectious central gameplay loop. It's wonderful seeing glittering shards of scrap metal going flying off your robot foes. Most standard enemies are the right kind of slow and stupid, just agile enough to make you feel

good about yourself when you explode their shiny metal heads. It makes me realise the only thing wrong with *Binary Domain* is that it tries to do too much, fussing and fluffing like an anxious vicar about to meet the head of the Women's Institute. But instead of offering an unnecessary proliferation of iced buns, *Binary Domain* insists on execrable boss battles and broken squad comms.

TURRETS SYNDROME

It's like a TV Tropes page for third-person shooters. It's not enough that there are turret sections; they have to happen during boss battles and also incorporate a tedious reloading mechanic *and* blundering NPC interaction. There's a bit where you have to fight poison gas and security droids in a futuristic cannabis farm, shooting shit you can't see while your suffocating teammate shouts at you. You even get to ride a Jetski out of a sewer, like Terminator



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April, 2012

PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
Devil's Details

LINK
sega.com



» and Police Academy 3 had sex and made a setpiece. There's far more variety here than I'd ever trust my brain to accurately remember. I would never have believed, for example, there was a bit where my team trundled around a car factory in little pods, like armed revellers in an unfurnished ghost train, but there it is. The problem is that most of these diversions are less fun than charging forward into cover and shredding

metal enemies with a machine gun, but on occasion it bangs. The section on an elevated monorail, for example, is exhilarating, even if it is just a fast corridor with windows.

I also have a special place in my heart for the cast of *Binary Domain*. Protagonist Dan Marshall is one of gaming's great dickheads. Controlling him is like playing as a Kevlar fistbump – a no-hands wheelie of a man whose favourite

phrase is 'holler if you're dead'. You get to carve out some of his personality via custom responses to your team's questions, but answering with anything even vaguely polite seems like a betrayal. But Dan seems positively nuanced compared to the rest of the team. We have Cain, a French robot who sounds like Poirot trapped in next door's dustbin; and Commander Charles Gregory, a character who's 70% posh British first names and 30% romantic lead from a Netflix Christmas film. Elsewhere there's a short-haired demolitions expert Rachel, whose character type is 'the one you're not supposed to fancy', except I do; and Big Bo, a crayon drawing of an African American who's like someone gave an ice-cream truck guns and taught it how to party.

FAYE ACCOMPLI

Any attempt to add depth to the characters in *Binary Domain* is slightly undermined by the limited trust system. You build rapport with teammates by killing enemies with them and saving them when they're downed, but there's a conversational element, too. It's fun, even if your options are mostly limited to 'yes', 'no', and 'dammit', and you mostly

ROBOTIC-TIC BOOM

Aim here for maximum enjoyment

1 HEAD

Shatter a robot's face, exposing the Terminator-like visage beneath.

2 ARM

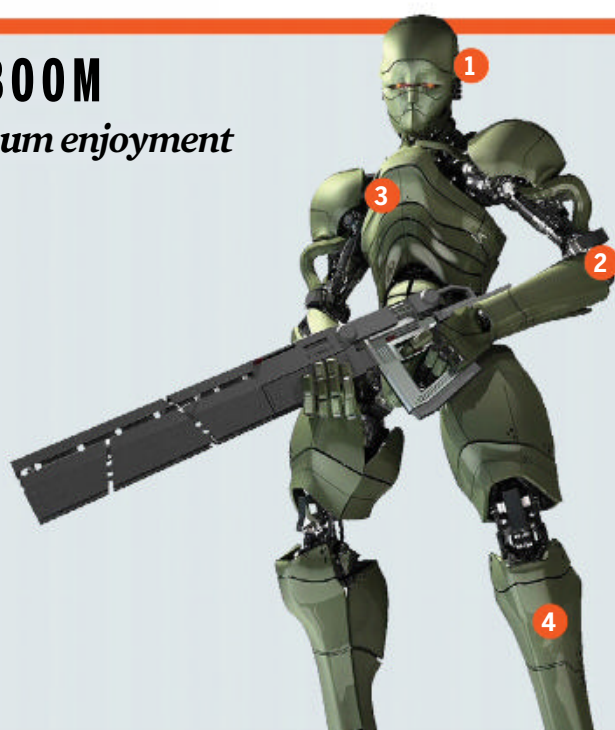
Blast his arms off and he's not going to be shooting you back any time soon.

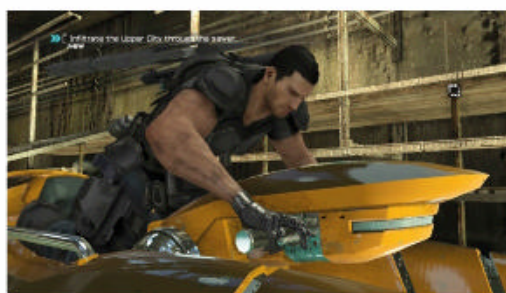
3 BODY

It ain't elegant, but enough shots to centre mass will blast him into scrap.

4 LEGS

There's something so satisfying about sniping out a limb so they have to crawl.





ABOVE: I've christened the one on the left 'Judy Hensch'.

RIGHT: True love is shooting a flying top hat.



win points for agreeing with everything they say. Yes, inequality is bad. No, we shouldn't start shooting up the coffee shop. There's even a bit where you get universal approval from your team by not agreeing to romance a 15-year-old girl, which seems like rather a low bar, even for a throbbing gonad like Dan Marshall. It's clumsy, but it does add some welcome texture.

There's also some interesting stuff with Faye, an impeccable sniper from the Chinese People's Liberation Army, who also acts as a love interest for Dan. The story goes to some unexpected places, asking questions about machine intelligence and what it means to be human, but it ends up feeling like the cup noodle version of a Kojima cutscene. Deep existential questions are avoided in favour of romance. Choices are made because Dan fancies someone, not because he's reevaluating the fine line between sentience and AI. And honestly, I'm sort of fine with it. It feels like a very *Binary Domain* way to deal with debates about transhumanism.

There are some bits that simply don't work. For whatever reason, I couldn't get voice commands to function, so my first forays into the

ENDS UP FEELING LIKE THE CUP NOODLE VERSION OF A KOJIMA CUTSCENE

game were amazingly awkward. Bo would ask me a simple question and we'd have an excruciating pregnant pause while he waited for an answer. Yes, Bo, we *should* shoot the robots. In the end I had to turn voice commands off completely, but not before I got to try the calibration tool, which deserves a mention just because the choice of words – shit, damnit, shitdamnit – is telling. Pad integration, if you chose to live that way, is shaky, too: onscreen prompts are still mapped to the keyboard, which adds an unwelcome layer of danger when it comes to in-game conversation. I managed to press the wrong button after a romantic cutscene with Faye and called her an idiot, which felt like too much of a jerk move even for Dan.

Other wrinkles are more frustrating. There are moments when you're peppered by missiles from unseen enemies. Squadmates strafe into your line of fire then complain about it. And, on occasion, ammo can



be frustratingly scarce, which feels like a terrible sin for a game with shooting this gleeful. The signposting is also terrible. It eschews in-game highlights in favour of dragging camera focus, which simply doesn't work. It's vague and frustrating, yanking your attention away from the action like a violent toddler holding hair straighteners.

But despite all this, I absolutely forgive *Binary Domain*. I love its lunkheaded, clumsy honesty. I love the crisp, metallic cleanliness that you only seem to get with games from the early 2010s, like a shiny, favourite shirt that's been ironed too many times. And, in fact, maybe I'm looking at it the wrong way. The misguided diversions that stop me doing the thing I adore – basically destroying green robots until my PC becomes obsolete – actually make those bits more appealing. Perhaps there's an alternate version of *Binary Domain* where I don't have to fight a robot gorilla too many times or get chased by electric spiders, and it actually makes me love the shooting less. The lesson here? Maybe all Sisyphus needed to appreciate his eternal punishment was a day spent rolling lots of different, smaller, more annoying rocks up the same hill. ■

FRASER BROWN



I'm going big this month. MMOs. Open worlds. Big ol' maps that'll take an age to conquer. Chuck your responsibilities in the bin and dedicate your time to one of these epics.

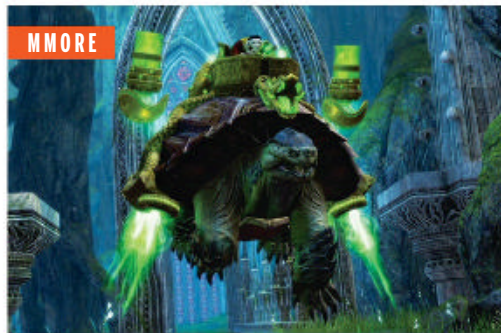


ALL-CONSUMING

ELDEN RING

bit.ly/3qij5jQ

→ FromSoftware's open world behemoth is impossible to escape right now, so you shouldn't even try to outrun it. Just let it embrace you and feed you runes and then stab you in the back and steal those runes. It's tough and brilliant and so far the best thing about 2022.



MMORE

GUILD WARS 2

bit.ly/3tl8WF5

→ Though it's rarely in the spotlight, *Guild Wars 2* remains a cracking MMO – if not the best one then at least the most fun – and the new *End of Dragons* expansion absolutely deserves a look. Ride giant siege turtles! Go on fishing expeditions on your very own boat! Paradise.



WAAARGH

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

bit.ly/364jaky

→ The final game in Creative Assembly's trilogy, *Warhammer III* is full of novelties, with a campaign that sends you jumping between realities, and factions that include a united daemonic army with a customisable leader. It's *Total War* at its most experimental and weird.



RUSH HOUR

FORZA HORIZON 5

bit.ly/3lI3jLp

→ *Forza Horizon 5* wants you to know that you're the best. The fastest, sexiest, most talented driver around. Optimism and glee shoot out of every exhaust as you speed across the massive Mexican playground. I wish I was there right now, so I'd better wrap this up quickly.



MUST



PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Fraser Brown



PASS THE BUCK

DISTANT WORLDS 2

bit.ly/3KZggMJ

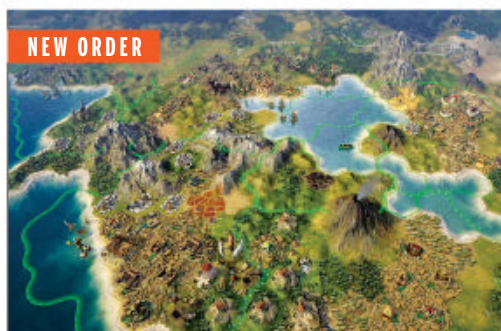
→ *Distant Worlds 2*'s obsession with minutiae and simulating so much of its galaxy and the empires fighting within it makes it one of the more complex 4X romps, but with its automation options you could probably play it in your sleep. Put the AI in charge and see what happens.



MONSTER MASH

DRAGON'S DOGMA:
DARK ARISEN
bit.ly/3wnWCWJ

→ Recent forays into *Monster Hunter Rise* and *Elden Ring* have reminded me how great *Dragon's Dogma* is, with its enigmatic world and huge monsters you can climb like a wall in *Assassin's Creed*. It's got a cracking character creator, too.



NEW ORDER

OLD WORLD

bit.ly/36t8fQW

→ *Old World* feels like *Civ*'s early game spread across an entire campaign, with a big chunk of *Crusader Kings*-style intrigue thrown in for good measure. Crush the world under your boot while arranging marriages, watching your kids grow up, and assassinating rivals.



STORY TIME

SIX AGES: RIDE LIKE THE WIND

bit.ly/3wh0992

→ A storybook-style narrative management game where you lead a clan to glory or extinction, *Six Ages* spits out countless compelling yarns as you learn to be a good (or rubbish) ruler. The words are very good, and so are the lavish illustrations, painting a vivid picture of the life of your clan.



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